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December 4, 1895.

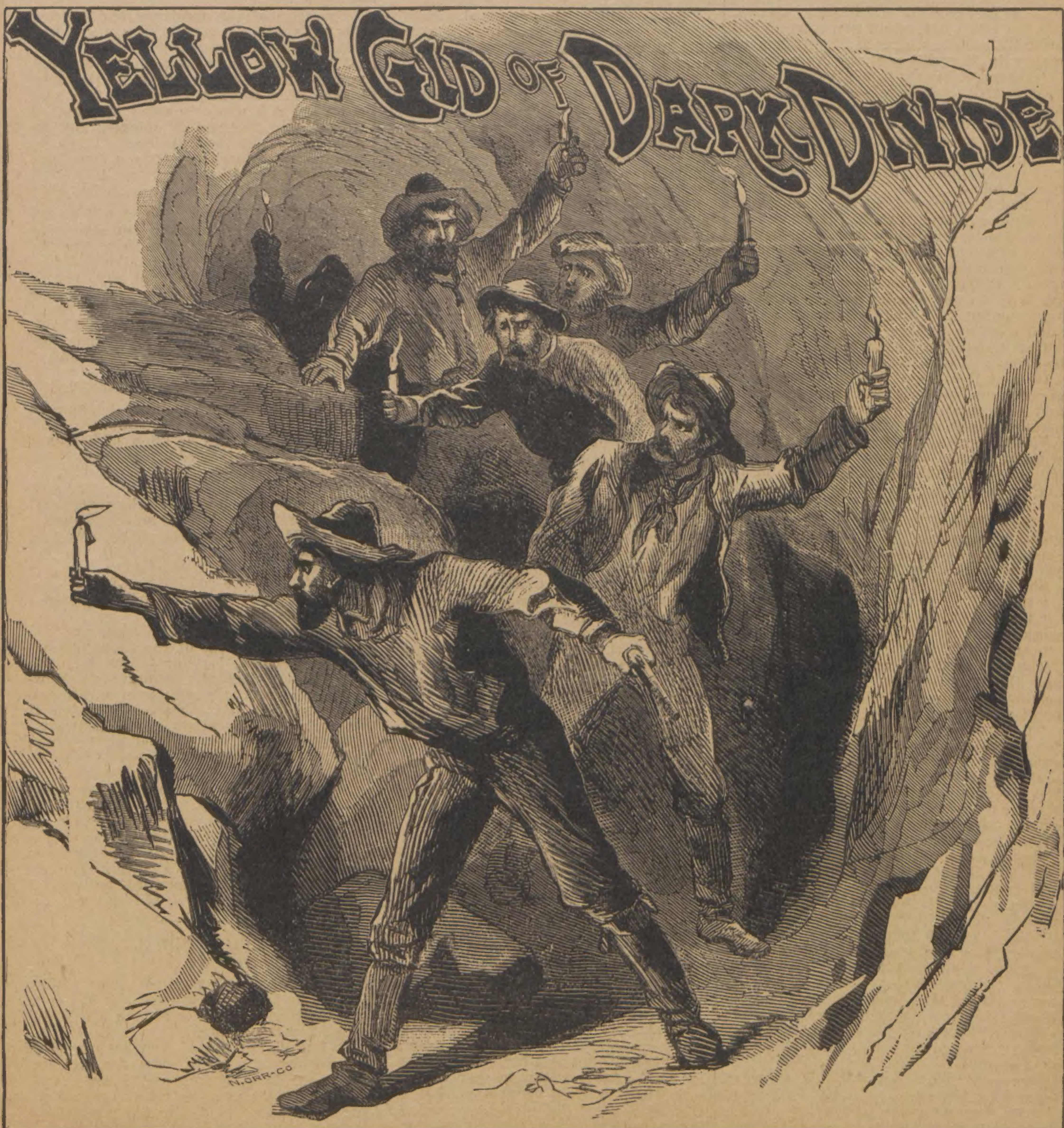
No. 893.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LXIX.



"AWAY, NOW!" ORDERED THE SHERIFF. "SEARCH EVERY CRACK AND CORNER, AND REMEMBER THE REWARD!"

Yellow Gid of Dark Divide;

OR, THE

Miner-Banker's Death Trump.

BY WM. H. MANNING,

AUTHOR OF "STEVE STARR, THE DOCK DETECTIVE," "PLUNGER PETE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BEFORE THE CALAMITY.

There was an air of expectancy in the mining town of Climax Claim. The hungry tiger experiences great delight in the anticipation of the feast which he thinks he sees almost within his grasp. Man is not wholly free from the instinct of the tiger; too often he is wonderfully like the jungle beast of prey.

Asher Bradstreet, chief clerk for David Morrell & Co., had just come back from a trip on business matters. Climax Claim was a town of constantly increasing importance; it already had a generous-sized population for a place so young, and there was a fast-growing aristocracy therein, too, but when Asher had first come to Mr. Morrell's service there had been less of money in Morrell's pocket. As a result, he had taken Asher into his own household to live, and there the clerk had remained up to the time mentioned.

Having been away, the clerk knew nothing of the expectancy felt by so many in town, and met Rosamond Morrell, daughter of his employer, with no idea of what was to follow.

It had been the fate of this young man to admire Miss Morrell. Some would have said he was below her in the social scale, and had no right to aspire to more than an occasional condescending word from her; but he was young, and at his age men do not usually stop to consider anything but their own feelings when they admire or are in love.

That they often admire unwisely might be proven in this instance.

He and Rosamond met on this present occasion, as has been said. She was calm and self-contained, as usual, but in his manner was an eagerness he could but imperfectly repress. Yet he tried to greet her without undue emotion, and conversed quietly for a while. He had something to say, however, and did not long neglect the chance.

"Miss Morrell," he remarked, with growing eagerness, "I wish to announce something to you—something I have not yet told to any one."

She looked politely interested.

"Indeed?"

"I am about to make a change in my worldly affairs."

"Are you?"

The matter-of-fact nature of the reply, and the utter lack of interest betrayed somewhat dampened his ardor but he quickly recovered and went on:

"I have now been with your father for several months as his clerk. When I came here I told him frankly it was my ambition to get an insight into the banking business, and then go elsewhere and start for myself, where I could demonstrate my ability, or lack thereof—in brief, rise or fall on my own merits."

Rosamond simply nodded.

"And you are going to leave us, now?"

Her question was listless, yet he had grown so much absorbed in his subject that he did not heed the indications.

"Yes. I have found the desired opening at Castle Cliff, and there I am going to pitch my tent, as I may say. It is far enough from here, so I shall in no way interfere with Mr. Morrell's business; indeed, I think we may be useful to each other. I have not yet spoken with him about this—I preferred to speak with you first of all."

Stronger than ever was his show of eagerness, but she was impassive.

"Do you wish me to break it to my father? I must beg to be excused, for I never meddle in affairs of business—"

"No, no, Miss Morrell; that is not it. I thought—"

He hesitated. His expression had grown more grave, and a doubt was pictured in his face. He added, slowly:

"I thought you might possibly like to learn of my prospective advance in life."

"Why, of course! I trust you will do quite well," and the young woman turned to the window to arrange a flower to her liking, while Asher Bradstreet regarded her in mute dismay. Gone was his eagerness, and he did not break the silence which ensued. Either he was in error, or he had reason to expect a different reception.

"Do you remain with us long?" serenely asked Rosamond.

"I don't know," he responded, gloomily, "and I judge you don't care!"

"Of course it is a matter between you and my father."

"No more?"

"What more should it be?"

A resentful reply trembled on his lips, but he did not give the words breath. Instead, he made a final effort in another way.

"I thought you might be interested, Miss Morrell."

"So I am," she declared, calmly.

"Father has always spoken of you as a faithful employe, and for you, as such, we shall always have a kind regard."

Asher's fine face flushed.

"As you would for a house-servant, I suppose?"

"Pardon me, I did not say so."

"Miss Morrell, have I not a right to expect some personal interest on your part?" he asked, bluntly.

"A right?" she repeated, frowning.

"The word was injudiciously chosen, but you know what I mean."

"Excuse me; I do not."

Rosamond faced him haughtily. Her mien and expression were far from amiable.

"You have called yourself my friend—"

"We were inmates of the same house."

Would you have me quarrel with you? If I have been civil, does that give you any 'rights' which the most casual acquaintance does not possess?"

If the words had been capable of any misconstruction, her manner was not. He had come back full of his new project, not only because he was ambitious, but that he had hoped Rosamond would be interested in it, and, sooner or later, would have more than a passing interest in what concerned him. Now he had been met with a rebuff he could not overlook.

His desire to pour out his new scheme in detail vanished. He did not yet feel the bitterness which might come later, for the simple reason that he could not realize the whole truth. He wanted to be alone, to study upon the situation, and reason out the secret of a change not to be comprehended at first view.

There was nothing to hinder him in this. Rosamond did not ask him to remain, and he was soon in his own room.

Among the household servants was a colored man of the name of Junius Green. The latter had always liked Asher, and he followed the young man to the room at once. On this occasion he was not welcome, for he interfered with Asher's plan of being alone, but, as he would not long be in the way, the young clerk did not send him away.

"Of course you want to know the news, as usual," remarked Junius, without much delay. "There's a pile of it now, sah. We've got a real live count here, sah!"

"A what?"

"A count, sah—a French count, sah."

"Where is he?"

"I reckon he's out for a walk now, though it's powerful odd that Miss Rosamond let him go alone."

"How so?"

"Wal, since he's been here they've been together most of the time, sah—generally take their walks together, you see."

"Ah!" Asher began to suspect he did see. Mention of the count seemed to shed a good deal of light on the change in Rosamond's manner. Junius resumed:

"I don't want to gossip, sah, but it ap-

pears to me we may get the count for good—or bad. If Miss Rosamond is as much mashed on him as she seems to be, I reckon she'll land her fish!"

Asher's back was toward the servant, and he kept it there as he inquired in a low voice:

"Do you really mean this, Junius?"

"Certain, sah! You see, this man come to town, and somehow he got a grip onter my master and mistress—it was her he met first, and she who first brought him to the house—and since then he's had pretty smooth sailing. Miss Rosamond is all gone on him, and the old master isn't saying a word against it all."

"Who is the noble gentleman?"

"His name is Louis Levere, Count of Something-or-other, I forget what. He's a guest of the house here now, you see."

Yes, Asher saw. Through all his love for Rosamond he had been aware that she was weak, selfish and uncertain. At times his better judgment had told him to forget her, but he had not been able to resist the charm of her presence.

Now, what Junius had told him, together with what he had seen in Rosamond herself, revealed the truth as plainly as he could wish.

The title of the foreigner had carried the girl's wits away, as many a girl had been bewitched before.

Junius had more to tell, but at that moment there was a knock at the door and another servant appeared. She bore a note which she proceeded to hand to Asher. He received it quickly, and as quickly opened the envelope. The contents were a surprise. Only a few lines of writing were there, and that little was in these words:

"Mr. Asher Bradstreet—You will please pardon me for addressing you, since you are a stranger to me, but there are the best of reasons why I should write this. Further than this I cannot say, but if you will come immediately to the house where I live—Mr. Mowbray's—I will prove to you that I am not talking idly. If you value your future happiness, do not neglect to answer the call. Come, and I will prove all I assert."

"HELEN CHESTER."

Asher remained looking at the note in wonder. He had no acquaintance with the writer, although he knew of her as a young lady who resided in the town.

What she could have to tell him he could not imagine.

The call was imperative, however, and he was not one to refuse notice to such a thing. He put the note safely away in his pocket.

"I'm going out now, Junius," he remarked. "I'll see you later on."

"But I've got more ter tell you, sah; I want to say that—"

"You can say it when we meet again."

Asher walked out of the room without more ceremony, leaving Junius with his information untold. Straight to Mowbray's house the young man went, and was gratified to catch sight of Helen at the window. He was not to be kept waiting, it seemed. He applied at the door, and was soon in the parlor. There he was speedily joined by Helen Chester.

She was a girl of about twenty years and decidedly pretty. He never had been given the chance to notice this fully in the past, but the fact dawned upon him now. She had a fine form and face, and her expression bespoke a clear conscience, and honest, straightforward nature. A pretty girl, but what could she want of him?

CHAPTER II.

THE WARNING.

Asher was not kept in suspense. When Helen had formally greeted him she came to the point with a frankness which was a part of her nature.

"I need not ask if you have received my note," she began, "for the fact that you are here proves you have it. Of course it is a great surprise to you, but I think I can so explain it that you will not object to the call."

"I assure you I have no thought of mak-

ing objection," he replied, promptly. "An attractive lady—"

"Wait," she interrupted, gravely. "I do not refuse to give a man his privilege of saying gallant things, but to you this is not the time for the saying. It is a time of grave concern, since I unwillingly, but with the best of intentions, bring you ill tidings."

"Of what nature?"

"Have you heard the news since you came home?"

Asher thought of Rosamond, but could see no reason why a stranger should call him to reveal what concerned only himself, and especially since he was not aware that his fancy for Morrell's daughter was public property. So he answered readily:

"I have heard no news."

"Do you remember that an atrocious murder was done on the mountain side just before you left town?"

"Yes."

"Has it not been mentioned to you since you arrived home?"

"No. I have not had opportunity to converse with any one to any extent. Has the murderer been discovered?"

A cloud passed over Helen's face, a look something like pity, too.

"If you had talked with the people here you would have learned that they think they have the clew—one but just discovered—and that immediate measures are to be taken to find and arrest him. All this you would have learned from the common folk of the town, for it is generally known, and upon every one rests that air of nervous suspense which goes with a great step not yet taken. I did not call you here to tell you of this, for any one would have told you. I have more to make known—something which but few know, and something you ought to know at once."

Asher had grown anxious. Vague as the warning yet was, he had conceived a fear which rested heavily upon him.

"What is it?" he demanded, quickly

"Not over ten persons in all the town of Climax Claim know who is to be sought for as the possible assassin. I am one of the few. The leaders of the town have tried to keep their movements and suspicions secret, but the facts came to me, nevertheless. I know whom they seek to arrest."

"Who is it?" almost imperiously.

"Harmer Gath."

She looked at him pityingly as she spoke, and that she had not miscalculated the force of the revelation was quickly seen. His face paled, and over it came a startled expression.

"Harmer Gath," he repeated, in a whisper, "he judged as the assassin?"

"That is what they will try to prove."

"But he is not guilty."

"If you can prove that, the sooner you do it the better. The searchers are not going with any good will in their hearts, and as they expect Harmer to resist arrest, your time to save him is before they find him."

The intimation was plain to Asher. The warning meant that Gath was expected to resist arrest, and might be killed in the fight which was certain to follow.

"How can I prove it?" he replied. "I do not know who did the deed, really, or where Harmer Gath was when it was done. I cannot prove it."

"Well, I thought you might like to know of the matter before it was too late. The leaders are going to keep their plans and suspicions secret from all. They will go with their party, and no one will be aware of their destination—not even the men who follow their lead. When they start it will, perhaps, be too late for you to do any good."

Asher appeared dazed for a time, but suddenly he turned to Helen.

"Why should you suppose I am interested in this matter?" he asked.

"Because," she steadily replied, "I know you!"

"Know me? What do you mean?"

"Simply that you are Gideon Gath!"

Asher started. His gaze upon his companion became intense, and he was slow in making reply. At last he inquired:

"Who is Gideon Gath?"

"The son of Harmer Gath."

"And you say I am that son?"

"Yes; I know it to be so."

"Who has been telling that story abroad?"

"No one. I think I may safely say that I am the only person but yourself in all Climax Claim who is aware of the fact. I recognized you as soon as you came. The yellow-haired son of Harmer Gath is well known, or was, in a certain way. Nobody could claim actual acquaintance with him, but his fame was widespread. You came here with black hair. I had seen you once before, and I knew you at once. No one else did, it seems. All the while you have been in town I have seen you daily, yet we never have been introduced, nor have we spoken until to-night. Your secret was mine, and I revealed it to nobody. Now, you will see why I summoned you here. I could tell you what no one else would who could; I could tell you that Harmer Gath has been suspected of the murder, simply on general principles."

"He is not guilty," exclaimed Asher.

"You say you cannot prove it."

"I cannot."

"Then the best thing you can do is to warn him and get him out of the reach of danger."

"I know not where to find him."

"Your chances are as good as those of the other searchers."

"True, true!"

The speaker's face lighted up somewhat, and he manifestly grew more hopeful. Then he looked fixedly at Helen once more.

"I do not admit that I am Gideon Gath," he remarked, "but if you believed me to be him, why have you never told the people? They would be glad to know that one of the family of the man they see fit to call the Vandal was among them, so they could drive him out of the company of those he might contaminate."

"The people can form their own judgments and make their own discoveries. I am not their spy, nor do I see fit to condemn any one unless I know he is deserving of condemnation. I see no reason why a man earning an honest living should not be permitted to go on and earn it."

Asher impulsively took the speaker's hand.

"Miss Chester, your sentiments do you great honor, and in the name of Gideon Gath, dishonored, condemned unheard, and marked for sacrifice without cause, I thank you."

She did not reply, but smiled into his face in a friendly way which might have aroused his thoughts at another time.

Now he had something else to occupy his attention, and when he had assured himself that Helen had told all she knew, he did not linger at the house. Thanking her appropriately, he departed, heavily burdened with anxiety.

While yet deep in meditation, he met one of the minor employes of the banking firm of David Morrell & Co.

"Mr. Morrell would like to see you at once," the employe announced. "He heard you were back, and sent me to find you."

The messenger passed on. Asher meditated for a moment. He was at a loss to know what could be wanted of him, but he had no notion of avoiding the meeting. He proceeded to Morrell's office, and found that gentleman at the desk.

David Morrell had been a lucky miner, and when he accumulated wealth he had branched out in his present line with equal success. By command of his daughter he never referred to the time when he had wielded pick and spade himself. That life he had left behind.

Certain other things he could not leave. He had been ignorant, grasping, low and mean, and those qualities clung to him like the skin on his face.

"Hullo, Brad! So you've shown up?" was his greeting. "What in thunder have you been doing all this while? What do I pay you for? Never mind, though, as long as you're here now. Say, do you want some fun?"

Asher managed to smile.

"What kind of fun?"

"Man-huntin', by thunder!" was the blunt explanation.

Asher clinched his hands tightly.

"Do you mean you are going to hunt a man?"

"What else should I mean? Yes; that's it, my boy! Times have changed at Climax Claim. They've changed twice since I first struck here. At first a man-hunt was no novelty, for we had the rockiest gang around us that ever man did see. Now, we're back to original principles. A man-hunt is on again, an' old times are at the fore. Sit down, and I'll tell you a little story."

"We've had road-agents of the good, old, genuine sort in our day, an' the worst we ever had was one Harmer Gath. He was a corker! I don't mean he was especially bloodthirsty, for he didn't kill so many as some men that we allowed to be on earth much less time; but Harmer proved to be the most slippery customer we ever ran up ag'in'."

"We set traps for him same as we did for others of his sort, but I'll be hanged ef he would run into them. In a word, he was so devilish cunnin' we could never trap him."

"Time rolled on; we grew in numbers here, an' road-agent work was not what it was of old. We hung so many of them up by the neck that we dazed them a bit."

"Candor compels me to say I don't suppose we dazed old Gath a fraction, but he finally ceased to operate. It was long before we knew the reason, but it seems one of the tenderfeet really got in his work an' put a bullet into Harmer which laid him up in his den for a few months."

"When he got about he withdrew from active life. He was about sixty-five years old, and probably he laid up enough by his honest toll—an' toll—to live in comfort. Anyhow, for the last five years we have never had trouble with Gath."

"He did not desert us in the meanwhile. Oh, no! He stuck to his mountain home, an', though he did no robbin', we used to see him an' his brood at intervals. We made several efforts to find him after he let up on robbin', but he was the same wily old Gath and nothin' come of it."

"I have mentioned 'his brood.' This means he had a family. There was a wife at one time, but she got out of sight in some way, and we suppose she died, and there were two children, a boy and a girl."

"These kids grew up in the mountains. Nothing in particular is known of them, except that the boy's name is Gideon, and that both were as wild as the mountain eagles."

"Travelers in the hills of Dark Divide used to see the two children dangling from the face of steep cliffs like mountain sheep, swinging from places none o' us would dare venture into, but apparently as safe for them as any spot in the Territory."

"We used to call old Harmer the Vandal, and the youngsters were worthy of such parentage. I could go on for an hour about them, but it is not with them that I have to deal; enough that they were the wonder of the town with their reckless disregard of life, in which they never had the least mishap, as far as we know."

"That's been the situation for some years, durin' which the children hev' growed up or died, we don't know which. We see them no more, an' only an occasional glimpse has let us know old Harmer is still on deck. He keeps at the old stand, but does biz in an improved way. I can't say ef it's a way more calculated to keep up public morals an' honesty."

"Jest where his den is nobody knows, but we're goin' ter make a strong brace ter find out. We want Gath fer murder!"

CHAPTER III.

YELLOW GID'S MISSION.

Asher Bradstreet had not been called upon to say anything, thus far, and though what he had heard had been painful to listen to, he had also been given time to collect his composure.

He was prepared to act his part without a sign of emotion.

"Whom has Gath murdered?" he inquired, carelessly.

"You know the man who was killed a few days before you went off on your business trip? Well, we think old Gath did it."

"What is the proof?"

"None. We're goin' ter seize Gath on suspicion an' look fer proof afterward."

"Suppose the people should rise, once you get him here, and lynch him?"

"That would mean no more sufferin' fer Harmer Gath."

"But, if he is innocent?"

"Then the lynchin' will pay off old scores. Mind you, I'm not goin' ter advise lynchin', but ef it goes that way, why, I ain't goin' ter be ter blame, am I? I remember the many times Gath has emptied my own pockets by stealin' my gold on its way East."

"You say that Gath has been living a quiet life for some time—"

"Yes, but it's the same old Gath. We're goin' ter gobble him, anyhow. It will be worth the plunder to parade him an' his tribe on exhibition. Thunder! but them two children were corks to look at! Both had hair as yellow as gold, long an' wild. Yellow Gid, we called the boy, an' the name fitted well. They ought to bring a fancy price if on exhibition."

"Suppose the old man resists?"

"We go to get him, dead or alive!" returned Morrell, closing his teeth after the remark with mastiff-like determination.

"And the girl? What will become of her?"

"Oh, we won't let such a beauty suffer," and the banker grinned broadly. "She'll find admirers enough in the town."

Asher's eyes glittered with sudden fire, but he was saved the trouble of reply. Morrell had become lost in reminiscences, and suddenly remembered he had business to transact.

"Brad, you know something of mountain life. Suppose you take charge of one of the three search divisions we propose to form?"

"I don't fancy man-hunting," promptly returned the clerk.

"Pshaw! these Gath barbarians are only animals anyhow!"

"They are human beings."

"I doubt it. Ef they be, they won't remain so long. Your notion of the lynchers is about correct. Once let the people suspect the old road-agent is on deck in this town, an' I wouldn't give a rap for his life. That's straight!"

"But his daughter—"

"A Vandal's child! Let her take her chances with her kind!"

Asher longed to take David Morrell by the throat and seek vengeance on him then and there, but he conquered the impulse and managed to reply coolly:

"I shall have to ask to be counted out. I am tired and weary, and a tramp over yonder mountain would be more than I am willing to undertake. Frankly, my conscience is not bigger than a barn, but I am not a man-hunter for fun or profit."

The speaker expected Morrell to resent the refusal, but such was not the case. The latter was not disposed to add an unwilling member, and he accepted the refusal in a matter-of-fact way, only requesting that Asher should not spread the fact of the contemplated movement.

"I don't suppose any one in town is a friend of the Vandal," he explained, "but we can't be too cautious."

Asher promised, and then went away. He met men on the street with whom he had become friendly since he located in Climax Claim, but now did not allow them to delay him. As soon as possible he got to his own room and locked the door.

This did not mean he was going to stay there, under such circumstances, all night, for there was work ahead of him. Morrell had explained that the party to arrest Harmer Gath was to start some time before daybreak, in order to be well up on the mountain side before light would enable the Vandal to see their advance.

This made it necessary for Asher to start ahead of them, especially as he had no definite idea of where Harmer Gath and his daughter were to be found.

When old Harmer ceased to operate on the road he had not deceived himself with the notion that he was to be free from danger, and though he led a law-abiding existence, he made it a point to shift his quarters frequently to avoid all possibility of surprise and capture.

Since his coming to the town Asher had not seen his kinspeople often, and when he did see them it was by means of a regular system. He would leave a note at a point where he knew his father or sister—for he was, in truth, Gideon Gath—would find it in a few days at the most, and by this scheme of giving them due warning, he could be informed just where they were to be found when wanted.

Now he did not know, and it was a matter of doubt whether his acquaintance with their habits would aid him at all in the effort to reach and warn them before their enemies reached them.

He did not start at once. He had much to think of, and was at that time thoroughly wretched. He had returned to Climax Claim with high hopes in his heart. His mind had dwelt chiefly upon Rosamond Morrell. After a hard struggle he had seen his business plans in a way of being crowned with success; whereupon all his thoughts had turned to Rosamond and the hope that she would share his fortunes. There had been nothing to show that trouble menaced his relatives.

What a change a few hours had made!

Not yet could he fully realize the extent of the double calamity.

"My father was right," he exclaimed.

"It was useless for one with my blood to dream of honorable life! Why didn't I take his sarcastic advice and adopt the calling of stage-robber?"

It was the outburst of a moment of bitterness, for it was not meant, but in that period of sorrow he felt, as many had done before him, how futile human effort was when all fate and the world were working on the other side.

"Good-by, Rosamond," he murmured, presently. "Now that I know you as you are, I would not rob your count of you, but the wounds of pride do not yield so quickly to reason as they might. Good-by forever! Yet, there is no good-by to the sting! It remains! it hovers near to mock and jibe! But you and I are done. After a while the sting will go, too. I believe I shall then—hate you; despise and spurn you!"

Half-musingly, yet with a measure of passion, was the prophecy made. It was the last time in his eventful career that Asher Bradstreet put evidence of weakness in words for Rosamond Morrell.

Quickly his thoughts turned to more ominous matters.

"My father and sister," he added, with a deep sigh. "My wayward, erring father!—my pure, innocent and loving sister! In his old age and bodily weakness the one is to be hunted like a dog for a crime I'll swear he never did; in that era of her life when womanhood is opening before her like a vast plain, when the things that wounded in childhood will wound the deeper, my poor Bianca must suffer—what? I dare not imagine. Imagine? No! This is a time for action, not for idle dreaming! To work, to work!"

From his trunk he took a suit of clothes such as he never had worn openly in Climax Claim. Plain and coarse was the material, and fitted for the plan he had in mind—for rough labor on the Dark Divide range.

He made the change, and then from his trunk he took a pair of handsome revolvers and a bright knife. The latter he ran down his back with the skill of one accustomed to the weapon's use. Something of this occurred to himself, then, and he smiled bitterly.

"Yellow Gid is still capable of exhibiting his skill as a climber of cliffs. He may prove what he never has shown these accursed townspeople—that he can use weapons as well as play the gymnast of the face of the crags! Heaven alone knows what the coming twenty-four hours will bring forth!"

By this time the hour was past nine, and as he had no more to do there, and no

reason for delaying, he left the house at once. On the way he had a glimpse of Rosamond, but did not attempt to speak to her.

Since he was dressed as he was, he so governed his movements as to avoid all observation. He was not even sure that caution was any longer necessary, for the next few hours might make all the town aware of his identity—that he was the Yellow Gid of the Gath family, and would stand no higher in consideration than old Harmer himself, but due care must not be neglected now.

Asher was not long in passing the town's limits. After that the wild mountain lay before him.

The history of that mountain might well be said to be that of Harmer Gath. He had been on the scene almost as soon as the gold diggers, and none of the latter had acquired the renown of the outlaw.

Not once had he been captured. Some there were who really believed that he was under the protection of an evil spirit that cared for him at all seasons; but, be that as it might, he had been a sort of uncanny mystery to all. As the eagle is seen going to its eyrie, so was the Vandal seen on Dark Divide, but, unlike the winged king, no one could find the eyrie of the lawless man.

Into this region, where rocks, erratic bits of timber and chasms of all sizes held wild carnival, hastened the son of Harmer Gath this night.

He went up the ascent with the old freedom and agility of movement, and though he did not dangle from the cliffs, as he had been seen to do in boyhood, it would have troubled the men of the town to keep anywhere in sight of him had they been along.

First of all, he made for the spot where he and his sister, Bianca, had been in the habit of leaving letters for each other since he took up his abode in town. He did not expect any there, for he had returned from his trip sooner than he had planned, but he still hoped to find something.

There was nothing, and he was left wholly in the dark as to where he should look for them. There were many caves and valleys in the range, but, though he knew them all, he could not even surmise where Harmer Gath might then be living.

He might be twenty miles to the east, or the same distance to the west or to the north, or anywhere within the limits of the wide and wild area thus indicated.

Asher was a man of undaunted courage, but the prospect worried him. Could he hope to save his father and sister?

Then he grew more hopeful. Harmer Gath had evaded the enemy for many years; perhaps he could still evade them even if he had no warning of their coming, though several years of peace had, perhaps, put him off his guard.

Asher sighed.

"I fear it all depends upon me. My father is old and feeble, now. He has no reason to expect this attack. May fortune bless my efforts in the case! If it does not, where is there one grain of hope?"

CHAPTER IV.

CONCERNING THE OUTLAW'S DAUGHTER.

One of the leading young men of Climax was Allen Graham. Ten years before, his father had come there as the schoolmaster of the town. The professor, as he was called, had always been the educational center from that time. As his son Allen had grown up unusual respect attached to his name, and he was deservedly popular, for his own merits.

On this evening Rosamond Morrell was surprised to receive a visit from Allen. As he was but little older than she, they had been companions from their childhood, but not especially intimate.

Long acquaintance had made Allen aware that Rosamond was not the kind of a person he could admire, and while there had never been the least trouble between them, he had not been in the habit of calling much at the Morrell house.

They always met in a friendly way, however. After some trivial talk he came to the subject of his visit.

"Do you know of the work planned for this night, Rosamond?"

"I know the men are going in search of the slayer of the last man killed in town."

"Do you know whom they are going after?"

"Not more definitely than I have said."

"The man is old Harmer Gath?"

"Ah! It's just like him to have murdered somebody. I suppose you are going along?"

"I suppose I'm not!" Allen retorted.

"Do you know there isn't an atom of proof against Gath?"

"Well, he's got a bad name."

"Should he be condemned on that account?"

"I suppose not."

Rosamond was indifferent, but Allen revealed in various ways that he was very much interested.

"Miss Morrell, it was your father who first suggested the advisability of taking old Harmer in on suspicion. Now, as I said before, there isn't an atom of proof against him; the ex-road-agent has lived a peaceful and retired life for six or eight years, and I regard it as unjust to disturb him for what he did not do."

"What of it? Such low wretches never reform. Why not send him to the lynchers, where he ought to have been long ago?"

She spoke impatiently, and was evidently tired of the subject, but Allen remained devoted to his idea.

"Would you have him suffer for another's crime?"

"What have I to do with it, anyhow?"

"Just this: Your father is the moving spirit in the plan. You have great influence with him, and can save Gath, if you will. Now, I ask you to remember that whatever were once Gath's shortcomings, he has reformed, and that he is not alone in the mountains. He has a daughter. Think of her, and act for the sake of a sister woman, if not for any other object."

"If you're in love with Gath's girl, look after her yourself!" retorted Rosamond, sharply.

"It so happens that she has not made acquaintance in this town. She lives only at Dark Divide. You and I have not had that region on our visiting lists, so we can know but little about it. Let us remember, though, that she is a woman, and, unlike Harmer Gath, is young. I fancy her father a grim old man, who would care but little whether he ever saw another sun rise. She is young—"

"And an outlaw's daughter!"

"Did you ever hear ill of her?"

"I am not her biographer."

"So you refuse your aid?"

"What do you want?"

"Induce your father to change his purpose—"

"And all for a wretched outlaw's daughter? No; most decidedly, no! I don't think you know what you are talking about. If you don't, I do! I positively refuse to do anything of the sort."

There was no mistaking the decision, and Allen felt that it would be a waste of words to try and change her verdict. He was disappointed, but not surprised. Knowing her as he did, he had expected such a result when he came.

The young woman made a faint effort to smooth over her refusal, but coupled it with the declaration that she was surprised at his assurance at asking anything of the sort of her.

He did not care whether she was or not, and left the house in a mood far from amiable. He walked thoughtfully down the street, and was thus progressing when he was accosted by a stout, rough-looking man, who might have been a member of any of the rude trades of the West, or almost anything else.

If he had been carved out of a knot, or some such material, he would have looked pretty much as he did now. His face was rough and coarse, and seamed by scars which might have caused prejudice against him in the East, but which passed without particular comment in the region about Dark Divide.

Allen had seen him around the town, but never had spoken with him, or, in-

deed, known anything in particular about him. He now opened conversation at once.

"Young feller, be you in it?" was his abrupt question.

"In it?" Allen repeated, somewhat blankly. "I fail to understand you."

"Easy as fallin' off a log. You an' me ain't in the same class, but thar' are some things we hev' a common interest in. Eh?"

"If you have a meaning you'll have to make it clearer. I fail to catch on. Come to the point!"

"Goin' up on Dark Divide?" asked the rough citizen, with a twinkle in his eyes.

Allen made a guilty start; then tried to bluff the matter off.

"Why in the world should I go there?"

"Young feller, you an' me ought ter hev' a bit o' a talk. I'll give my affidavit we kin make it interestin' fer each other, an' ef you don't take no stock in my say-so, jest you give me ten minutes ter whisper to ye. I'll convince you, or forfeit the high reputation possessed by old Peter Potts. I'm him!"

"Go on!"

"You don't look like a man who would do much work as a nat'ralist, as some folks call them who dig among rocks an' plants fer what they kin find, but you may hev' done a bit at it. Did ye ever find any nice specimens up on the mountain, thar'?"

Peter Potts extended his hand and indicated the highest peaks of Dark Divide, one would say. Allen could not avoid another slight start. He answered coolly enough, however.

"I know nothing about the region you refer to, my good man."

Peter's grim face did not change.

"If I'd been a Sunday school boy I know I should not lie as you do; it would be ag'in' my principles. Never found no nice specimen up there, did ye?—no specimen with yeller hair an' blue eyes, eh? Oh, no! You never found nothin' o' the sort!"

Peter Potts did not laugh, but he made a certain kind of a sound which, mysterious in itself, seemed to the listener like a grim and not unfriendly chuckle.

"Tell me plainly what you mean!" Allen requested.

"I mean that you kin tell more about Harmer Gath's daughter, ef not about Harmer, than most men in town would suppose!"

The answer was plain enough, and Allen felt his face flush. He was not ashamed of anything he had done, but it was not pleasant to see that what he had supposed was his own secret had, at least one outsider as a possessor.

"I asked you to talk plainly," he remonstrated.

"Bless you, ef I ain't done so I will. I happen ter know you hev' put in ye'r time ter profit, this season. I can't say how you got started, but you did get a move on, somehow, an' the result of it all was you hev' seen Harmer Gath's girl right along regular."

"Now, hold on, young feller; I don't know ez thar' is anything out o' the way in that. She's ez pretty as a peach, the gal is; an' I allow you'd be a fool ef you didn't improve ye'r chances. I wouldn't say that ef I didn't think you meant her right straight and well. Thar' is some men who don't care a rap fer the feelin's o' those who hev' been placed below them in the social scale, an' they only think o' their own selfish ends."

"I don't know whether you are a saint or a sinner, an' I confess I don't care a rap, except ez concerns Bianca Gath; but she's a good one, she is; and I wouldn't look on her ez your friend ef I didn't think you was all right, just as they make 'em."

"Now, don't think I'm no tell-tale or sly, fer I ain't. I ain't even a friend o' Harmer Gath's, fer I ain't never had no dealin' with him, but I'm a man who hez his eyes open an' sees a good many things others don't see."

"I've seen you an' Bianca walkin' together, an' seen that you an' her walked with ye'r whole lives in the work. I guess I don't hit wide o' the mark when I say

you an' she is dead in love with each other."

"Hold on, young feller, hear me out!"

"Now, you're interested in her, an' I'll say ter you that she an' her whole family is in big danger. Mighty few friends hev' they ter save them from what others may mark out fer them, an' it behooves them few ter be up an' doin'. Be you one o' them, or is the interest you've professed in her only a humbug?"

Peter Potts came to the point not only with words, but his manner had a directness not to be misunderstood. Whether he was sincere was a different thing, and one which was of more than passing interest to the object of his address.

All he had said about Allen and Bianca was true, but not for a good deal would the young man have it made public. Troubled and uncertain, he resorted to delay.

"You have asserted certain things. How do you know anything of the sort ever occurred?"

"Seed it with my own eyes!" placidly replied Peter.

"Are you sure it was I—"

"Now, say, don't!" Potts earnestly requested. "Ef you won't hev' no part o' me, say so an' be done with it; but don't make a fool o' me an' ye'rself, both. I know what I say, an' I ain't tryin' ter put you in no trap. I ain't ye'r enemy, young feller."

"I'll trust you, Mr. Potts," Allen decided. "The time is one when the friends of Harmer Gath should rally to his support, and if we are such, we have a call in the case which we cannot overlook. I suppose you know him well?"

"Not an atom. I don't know him nor Bianca, but I hev' seen her, and it suits my fancy ter save her ef I kin. I think I kin tell a pretty girl when I see one."

"Is that why you wish to aid her?"

Peter made an impatient gesture.

"Don't be foolish!"

"Or is ther some truth in the old story which some one once whispered to me that you have seen a bit of road-agent life yourself?"

"Ef anybody told you that," retorted Potts, coolly, "he could hev' made a good livin' by mindin' his own business."

"We will not quarrel over small things, sir. How can we save Bianca Gath from her danger?"

"By findin' her! Ef you know Dark Divide, an' the habits of old Harmer, as you ought, you are doubtless aware it is no easy thing ter say where father an' daughter are in camp. Gath is wary, ef he has been out o' sight as a road-agent fer many years, an' he has made his home in one place this week, an' another the next week. Whar's his den just at this juncture?"

Allen looked up toward the long, somber line which marked the area of Dark Divide.

Truly, it was a tangled land, and it would be no simple task to locate the father and daughter.

"Perhaps you are able to help me out?" he suggested.

"Thar's only one way. The gang led by Dave Morrell's men will hunt, an' while they're doin' it we kin do the same thing. Ef we find first we kin save the Gaths—unless thar's a fight; in which case et might be a matter of bullets. Still, you're with me?"

Allen took his companion by the hand.

"Be you saint, road-agent or Satan's own, I'm with you in this!" he declared. "Come! We may be needed up yonder. I will go with you to victory or to destruction—to death, if need be, to save Bianca!"

CHAPTER V.

THE LIFE HUNTERS.

"This sight makes me feel like a man-slayer myself!"

Asher Bradstreet stood on a high point of land-rock in the heart of the Divide. Far below he could see the lights of Olimax Claim. It was rare for lights to show there at that hour, but this was a special occasion. The fighting men of the town had gone out to hunt for a murderer, and the non-combatants were so inter-

ested in the outcome that few thought of putting out their lights until they saw if news was to come in a reasonable time.

But Asher saw more. Between the town and himself other lights were visible, on the slope of the mountain, and far from stationary. They moved about in a course, which the roughness of the way rendered erratic, but rose slowly and steadily.

"One wrong never made amends for another," murmured Asher. "If a man was done to death at Climax Claim, it does not wipe out the enormity of the deed for the chief men of the place to seek the life of one who had no part in the crime. If my father is captured, the man-hunters will show no mercy."

His indignation at sight of the man-hunters almost overmastered him, and there was a mighty struggle in his mind.

"It maddens me!" he huskily whispered. "I have tried to live an honest life; to enjoy a reputation free from all blemish; to prove by daily work that there is some good in the despised family of Dark Divide, and this is the result! My unfortunate father never did a thing as vilely mean as this. These men would bring my innocent sister to the worst of calamities, and without any evidence that they should blame our father. Is this the way the men of so-called civilization are constituted?"

He then paused there no longer, and for another hour was very busy on the search, but he found no sign of his kindred. Then he moved back to where he could see the searchers again.

They had progressed far more rapidly than he had reason to expect, and were now so close at hand that the light of the torches enabled him to recognize many in the party. All were armed, and ready for serious work.

They were halted, and the sheriff of the town proceeded to make a speech. Asher went forward, and was soon near enough to hear the closing words.

"Remember," directed the orator, "that David Morrell expects you to succeed at all hazards. This is his hunt in the full sense of the word, and his money will repay you for your trouble. You are to take Harmer Gath alive if you can, and peacefully, but Morrell has plainly stated that he must be taken at all hazards. The reward has been made for him, dead or alive!"

"It'll save a pile o' trouble ef we don't hev' ter take him back with us!" shouted a miner, "an' dead men sleep as wal in mountains as in valley!"

A remark that made further impression on Yellow Gid Gath. His breath was drawn as if with an effort, and his hands moved nervously on the barrel of his rifle.

"Away, now!" added the sheriff. "Search every crack and corner, and remember the reward."

They hustled away in groups to begin the work, but none of them saw the man with the rifle who hovered near; in case they were successful, he would be on hand to save his father and sister.

Two hours passed. One of the detachments was near a region where Gideon knew his father was in the habit of lingering much, and though the son had looked there earlier in the evening, he was following close after. A dozen men were near, all hurrying about.

Suddenly a shout arose from one of them.

A revolver shot came like an echo.

"Here they are!" cried a hunter. "In that tunnel thar' I seen a man, an' ef it wa'n't old Harmer Gath I'm a liar. Bring ye'r torches, an' we'll see what sort of an animal it is! Come on, an' I'll lead!"

It was a narrow passage between two walls of rock—a place which the discoverer had well termed a tunnel.

The speaker took a torch and started in.

The tunnel was some forty feet wide and twenty high; not a place, certainly, where one could do much dodging when sharply looked for, and whoever was there bade fair to be unearthed.

"We'll never find nobody in here!" declared a weak-kneed follower. "There's

crannies enough in here fer an army ter hide, an' ef it was Harmer Gath you seen—"

"Hi! ain't that him?"

Only a few yards in front of them stood a man.

He was by a cliff, and one of his hands rested upon it. He was of large figure and impressive appearance, much of the latter element arising from the fact that he had a big, white beard. So might the old patriarchs have looked, but his age aroused no sympathy from the hunters.

"Harmer Gath!" cried one of them, eagerly.

"Shoot him if he don't hold up!" exclaimed another.

It was, indeed, the old road-agent who stood there facing them calmly, it seemed, but when a line of rifles were brought to bear upon him he naturally drew back.

"Shoot him!" advised a reckless searcher.

He set the example himself, and the revolver sounded with a roar in the close quarters. He of the white beard turned to flee, and with his back thus presented, the balance of the party took the advice so heedlessly given and a volley was sent in his direction.

He had turned to go up a slight rise, but the discharge took him before he had gone far. He hesitated, lost his hold on a point of rock he chanced to be grasping, reeled—then came down with a crash and rolled to the bottom of the ascent.

The marksmen sprang forward with eagerness, and half a dozen of them were upon him before he could make any effort to rise. Many hands clasped and held him fast.

"Don't let him use his knife!" cautioned one of the men.

"Get in the first blow yourself!"

"Remember, the reward says dead or alive!"

All were ready with advice, and equally ready to act, now the once-famous road-agent was in the toils, but there was no occasion for an exhibition of their superiority of numbers and strength. Old Harmer Gath did not even struggle.

"Say! I believe we've done fer him!" added a hunter.

There was a relaxation of muscles, and more room was made around the fallen ex-robber. He did not improve the chance to resist, but lay with closed eyes and an air of general collapse.

"Done fer, by mighty!"

Slowly Gath opened his eyes. There were those in the party who had seen much of wild life, and had seen men die. They said no more about hostilities, then, for they believed they saw in his clouded eyes the sure sign of the death angel's near approach.

He looked around with an uncertain stare, as if not conscious where he was. Then a tremor passed over his frame, he sighed, moved feebly, and closed his eyes with a deep breath.

"Dead!" muttered one of the searchers, half in awe.

There were but few there who had the disposition to waste any time or pity on an outlaw who had ceased to be a scourge, real or imaginary, and one hearty voice expressed the sentiments of all:

"It's the best job the old cuss ever did!"

"Good riddance to bad rubbish!" added another.

Yet another man bent over the fallen outlaw.

"Dead, sure enough! No heart, no pulse. Harmer Gath will take toll no more on the trail."

The speaker seemed as much pleased as if many years had not elapsed since Gath had done any work of the sort, and appeared to forget that time had turned the road-agent's hair and beard snowy white. That whiteness would have appealed to many men, even if they had no love for him who carried the signs, but it did not affect the rough miners. They did not forget that he had been the worst enemy of their craft that ever was seen at Dark Divide.

Dead Harmer Gath certainly was, and his end, though it came under the general

head of violence, had been, as peaceful in one sense as his past life had been rough. He had died without taking any part in the fight; he had died with his back peaceably to the foe; and died without suffering, as far as could be seen.

"Whar's the gal?" was the sudden demand.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VANDAL'S DAUGHTER.

The person who uttered the last words was no longer young, and was not actuated by any motive of gallantry or curiosity in calling for the road-agent's daughter.

"When we take the wolf don't let us forget the wolf's young!" he added. "We don't want to leave Gath's gal to wander at her will. She has the family blood, and might do us some harm, later on. Ef we take her when we kin get her thar' won't be danger on that head, an' ef all accounts are true, we kin hev' the trimmest maid in all these parts simply by gobblin' her. What say?"

All had something to say, and they spoke as with one voice.

"Give us the gal, fer you bet she's not far away. Scatter out among the rocks, boys!"

There was a general arousing, when suddenly there was a halt.

"Look!" almost whispered one, in awe.

Another figure had appeared on the ledge. Somewhat above them, and near where Harmer Gath had been when he received his fatal hurt, was seen a person who had not the rugged form of the old road-agent, but whose presence for a moment checked even the rough man-hunters.

"Gath's girl!" added another.

It could be no other. It was a woman; it must be the Vandal's daughter, for no other woman was to be looked for there.

No word came from her, and she gave no sign of having seen them at all. She did, however, gaze at the dead road-agent intently. Then she took a step down the ledge—a second step—a third.

Still she looked only at the fallen man, and her whole manner was like that of one who moved in a dream.

The hush among those who had made her an orphan was not broken; in almost breathless silence they watched her come toward them.

As she came nearer it was seen that she had hair of golden hue; beautiful hair they might well have admired at another time. More than this, she looked wonderfully charming then, and they grew uneasy. What had they done?

She reached the fallen road-agent and slowly knelt by his side. She put out her hand and touched his face. She seemed to expect his eyes to open, but they did not. Then the half-dreamy expression which had been on her face gave place to a sudden look of fear.

"Father!" she whispered.

The death-stilled lips did not move.

"Father, why don't you speak to me?" she asked, tremulously.

The beautiful face was no longer composed, but the weight of a great sorrow was settling there.

She saw then, for the first time, a little stream of red which had gathered on the rock, and with a sudden, sharp cry, she flung herself upon the body.

"Dead!" she wailed; "dead, and lost to me forever!"

Then she broke into a torrent of sobs which shook her whole form.

Some of the men moved away, not a little upset by the sight. Harmer Gath had been shot down without provocation, and this was the result. There he lay, and his now orphaned daughter had only his lifeless remains left of what he had been to her. To some the deed seemed far from manly, and they forgot what he had been in the past. An inoffensive man he certainly had been through many years, but he had been shot like a ravening wolf.

And the weight of the sorrow was not falling on his shoulders, but on those of one against whom they know no harm.

But these sympathetic men were in the minority. Most of those present had no pity for one who was of his race.

She called the dead man by many names of affection, and her tears and kisses were rained upon his face like a flood. Could it be he was all bad when such love was vouchsafed him?

After a while she grew calmer, and her sobs were less frequent. Her face was concealed in the wealth of her loose-flowing golden hair, as she buried that face in his bosom, and no more could be told.

It was at this stage of affairs that another man entered the tunnel. His arrival was unnoticed by anybody until his voice rang out in tones of authority:

"What is going on here?"

And a searcher who had only the reward in mind, quickly replied:

"We've done the job well, Mr. Morrell. Harmer Gath is dead, and hyar's his gal."

"Dead? By thunder! that's better news than I dared ter hope fer. Whar' is the old varmint?"

David Morrell pressed forward until he saw the group by the ledge. The sight sobered him for a moment. He had no good in his nature, and pity did not make itself felt, but the sight was certainly one calculated to make an impression on the most stupid being. He gazed in silence, marking the dead man and the girl with the golden hair who lay on his still form.

At last he spoke:

"It's them, sure enough. You've done wal, boys! The reward's yours, by thunder!"

"Don't talk of the reward now," urged a disgusted hunter. "Don't you see that girl is sufferin' because she's lost a father?"

It was a cutting reproof, but Morrell unfeelingly answered:

"Nobody need waste no sympathy on the Gath gang. I gave my orders, an' I reckon by the looks o' things there was somebody hyar who just about understood them. 'Dead or alive,' said I, an' the work has been done to the letter. It's a good job!"

"Is the murder of the tenderfoot, for whose slayer you've been huntin' so long, avenged now?"

"Certain!"

"Where's the proof that Gath had any hand in it?"

"Now, don't you get funny!" ordered Morrell, roughly, "I don't care a rap whether Gath was guilty or not; it was a good job to get him out o' the way. See?"

The citizen with the conscience said no more. He saw he had the crowd against him, and the will of David Morrell was supreme, so he relapsed into silence.

The banker suddenly advanced, and taking Bianca's hand, lifted her roughly to a sitting position.

"Get up!" he ordered.

She aroused, and, for the first time, seemed to realize a part of her surroundings. She put the hair back from her face with an abrupt gesture, and looked into Morrell's face. There was a wild gleam in her eyes, and an expression of half-crazed grief, which ought to have moved the man, though he remained indifferent to it.

"Don't you hear?" he demanded. "Get up, I say! You are our prisoner. We shall take you to Climax when we are ready to go in to be dealt with according to law. Take her away!" and the banker pushed her rudely toward his nearest man. She suddenly seemed to realize what that all meant for her. She stretched out her hand toward her dead father.

"My father!" she exclaimed. "Oh, no, no; do not take me away from him. Let me stay; let me stay!"

Morrell tore her roughly from the body.

"Take care of the minx," he ordered, "Get her far enough away so she will make no racket, and some o' you see to this outlaw. Dead, is he? Wal, it's a good job an' good riddance. The reward shall be as promised."

Bianca Gath, though reared in a school supposed to harden one's nerves and sensibilities, was not proof against the sorrow of the moment. She fainted as she was dragged away, and no further attention was given her by those who remained behind. In a recess just outside the tunnel the two who had been selected to care

for her laid her down, and stoically waited for her to recover—or die! They did not care which.

The banker examined the dead man closely.

"So this is the sort of a critter he was! Why, he looks like one o' the old patriarchs I used ter see pictured out in a book when I was a child. Mild o' face as a parson, by thunder! How did he ever manage to make terror so long along the trail?"

He looked dead Harmer Gath over fully, and then turned again to his men and ordered:

"Take the body out and hang it up by the heels! We must make an example o' him ter keep other vermin within due bounds."

The idea met with approval, for the hunters had been thring of inactivity, and they started to obey. Before they had borne the body far, however, those near the front became aware that some one who had taken no part in the affair was approaching, and as they emerged from the tunnel they were confronted.

There the light was strong, and as it fell on the scene around, they saw a man of fine figure, armed fully, and resembling a true mountaineer, while under his hat was hair which was like gold in color.

This person stood in their path, and advance was out of the question.

His manner was strange and striking. He gazed at the burden they bore with dilated eyes, and his whole aspect was wild and unnatural. He put forth his hand and spoke in a husky voice.

CHAPTER VII.

YELLOW GID COMES.

"What have you there?"

He of the yellow hair asked the question, and one of the bearers of the burden coolly replied:

"Wal, it's a dead corpus now. A bit ago it was old Harmer Gath!"

Under the yellow hair the face of its owner looked strangely pale.

"What has happened?" he inquired, almost inaudibly.

"Only a shootin'. We come out ter hunt fer game, an' we found it. We met the road-agent, an' you see the result. We give him enough lead to settle the matter forever."

David Morrell had grown impatient, and he pushed to the front.

"Who are you who are so much interested in this matter? You don't belong at Climax Camp, as far as I can tell?"

"Oh! he only wants ter help us hang the dead man up, accordin' to your orders!" laughed a miner.

"Hang him?" echoed the yellow-haired stranger.

"Yes," retorted Morrell. "We couldn't do it while he was alive, for the bullets got in their work first, but we can now."

"Not while I live!" declared he of the yellow hair, and his eyes blazed with sudden fire. "Surely, you are not so brutal as to wish to vent your spite on the dead?"

"My orders go!" snapped Morrell, "an' ef you don't like the style you kin go to thunder! Do you hear me?"

The orders he referred to had been given without particular thought, and any little impulse of his own mind would have caused him to drop the whole notion, but the opposition made him determined in his course. He had been a species of king at Climax Claim since he became its rich man, and had grown arrogant and stubborn. He glared at his new adversary, and sharply added:

"I say, who are you?"

"A man who has not left all human feeling behind."

"Blame me ef I don't believe you are old Harmer Gath's son!" declared the banker. "I've heard of that yellow hair before, or I'm a liar!"

Suspicion, once started, travels fast, and there was a general centering of attention upon the supposed stranger. Most of those present had seen the road-agent's son in the past, more or less clearly, and the banker's words had distinct meaning for

them. All looked, and one abruptly cried out:

"Right you are! That's Yellow Gid!"

"Fact, old man!" corroborated a second searcher.

Conviction came upon all. They saw the stranger clearly, and his resemblance to the boy of old was too strong to admit of doubt. The discovery was astonishing to them. It was long since the junior Gath had been seen in Dark Divide, and they had not been sure whether he was alive, but there he certainly was.

Oddly enough, none of them saw the likeness to Asher Bradstreet.

All that was low and vicious in David Morrell's nature came to the front.

"We're glad to see you, Mr. Gideon Gath!" he declared, jubilantly. "Some men stand higher in life than you, but I don't know of one who is so welcome hyar. We have a fancy for the company of the Gath family to-night. Yes, we're glad to see you, by thunder!"

Ominous was the manner of the speaker, but nobody felt any sympathy for the yellow-haired son of the Vandal. Some smiled scornfully as they noted how pale he was, and heard his low-spoken inquiry:

"Men, have you seen a young girl here?"

"Seen her?" cried Morrell. "You bet we have; a damsel we all admire, if she has got the blood of the Gaths in her veins. Oh! we won't let the lynchers have her! She's too pretty for that. We have other uses fer her!"

Yellow Gid was the young tiger now.

"Dog!" he shouted, "if you lay one hand upon her I will have your worthless life for the deed! Keep off, or you shall pay for it in a way which shall leave no room for another debt!"

All of Morrell's temper flashed up, and turning to his men: "Cover that fellow!" he shouted.

A dozen rifles were brought to bear upon the single man.

"Shoot him like the dog he is if he makes one attempt to do harm to any one hyar!" the banker added. "We don't fool around with no such cattle. Now, what are you going ter do about it?"

Gideon Gath was not there to wage indiscriminate war; he had no disposition to do violence to any one but Morrell; but now, in the figurative language of the West, "the drop was on him, and he was out of the game."

"Now what?" inquired the banker, grimly.

Yellow Gid stood in silence.

"Do you want fight?"

There was a sneer in the words, but it did not move Gid to make reply. He gazed at Morrell fixedly, as if undecided what to do.

"Disarm and bind him!" now ordered the banker.

Gideon began to move backward, still facing the slayers of his father. His eyes gleamed like the flashing of two torches.

"I'll kill the first man who puts hands on me!" he cried, bringing his rifle to a ready.

But, unknown to the man at bay, a stalwart man of the gang was in the rear—right in the path of retreat, and almost before Gideon was aware he was enclosed in the enfolding arms, and, instantly, down upon him rushed those in front.

The struggle was brief. Yellow Gid was overcome and as promptly bound with ropes which he could not break.

Then the men stood back and looked at their work.

"A good job, by Jove!" Morrell declared, "and I'll remember it when figuring up the cost. He's a prisoner; old Gath is dead, an' the girl is ours too. Ef that don't about clear out the Gath gang, I'm no judge. Thunder! but ain't we in luck!"

"But, I say, how about the hangin' bee?" asked one of the miners.

Morrell seemed struck by the suggestion, and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"It seems a pity to rob you of all your fun, I admit. That is a pile o' fun in sech matters, sure ez you live. Do you really want him?"

The majority of the men did not, but, as usual, the moderate element kept quiet, and the rougher part spoke quickly.

"We do! Ain't we to have no sport? Give us Gid Gath, an' let's show all evil-doers how we manage things in this section! Up with the last of the Gaths, we says!" and the speaker advanced to lay hold upon the bound man.

The end seemed near, and Gid Gath broke his silence.

"Stop! I ask no favors of you for myself, but one I do ask, and if there is a man here who has a spark of human feeling, I request him not to turn a deaf ear. My sister—"

But his speech was cut short, for many hands were on him and he was hustled away.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DEED WHICH MAY MAKE TROUBLE.

The men of Climax Claim had simply allowed their passions to run away with them. They had tasted blood, and, tiger-like, were hungry for more. Thus it was that they stooped to work they might repent later on.

Not far away a scraggy tree thrust itself out beyond the face of the cliff, and this seemed just what they wanted. Ropes were not lacking, and one of the proper length was thrown over the most available limb and all made ready for the execution.

Yellow Gid saw no hope, but his pride led him to face them with unwavering front. It was no effort on his part, for his courage was of the best, and some there were more influenced by this magnificent exhibition on his part than they would have admitted.

There was no delay in the horrible work. Morrell himself gave the word:

"Up with him!"

The rope tightened, and Yellow Gid was partially raised, when there was an unexpected diversion. In front of the lynchers sprang a person who evinced no desire to take hold of the rope. Instead, he held a bright knife, and with one sweep of the blade he cut the rope in twain.

Dumfounded at the interruption, the lynchers seemed to have no power of motion. Even Morrell was stupid with amazement.

With another sweep of his knife the stranger severed the bonds which confined Gideon's hands, and then began pushing him away.

Then the spell was broken, and the gang sprang forward to grasp their victim again.

But they suddenly stopped, for in each of the strange rescuer's hands was a revolver, and the firing was not delayed. Each weapon spoke hot defiance to the lynchers, and at each shot the man retreated further up the ascent.

Morrell, now furious in his anger, and hot in his desire for vengeance, waved his hands wildly as he shouted:

"Fire! Shoot them down! Don't let them escape! Fire! I tell you—fire!"

The fugitives were then on the rising land just above, and the response to Morrell's order was a literal roar of the guns of those below.

The stranger was unstricken, apparently, for he bounded away, but Gideon was seen to stagger, and then to pitch headlong to the ground.

"Up an' get him!" shouted Morrell. "I reckon the Gath brood is about played out now! Don't fear the other cuss, boys, but go up and bring the yellow hair down."

The men advanced hesitatingly, and when, at length, they reached the spot where Gideon had apparently fallen, he had disappeared, and they discovered at that point a mere gap in the rocks—a very narrow canyon, into which he must have crawled.

"That's the last of him!" declared an old resident. "I know that hole. We can't get at him, but I'll swear he never'll get at us again. It's a hundred feet deep, and a stream of water runs at the bottom like a race horse. The strongest man among us couldn't live in the stream, and a wounded man would have no chance at all. It's good-by to the last male Gath!"

Morrell expressed his dissatisfaction and disbelief.

"He may have caught somewhere near the top," he asserted.

"Lower a torch and see what you can see," suggested the other.

The idea pleased Morrell, and, by the aid of the light, a view was had of the chasm. It showed a wall of rock, and the sharpest scrutiny failed to discover ledge or point to which the falling man could catch, or on which he could lodge.

The rush of the water came to their ears, and even Morrell could not doubt.

"It's all right, I reckon," he admitted. "We will look into it a bit to-morrow, but it hardly seems necessary. Still," he hesitatingly added, "the fellow may be harder to kill than we think."

"He was a dead man when he went over the edge. I've seen enough of shooting to know the signs," affirmed the previous speaker. "That reel of his was that of a dying man, as sure as you live. Oh! he's gone up, and don't you doubt it!"

"Exit Yellow Gid!" yet another hunter was moved to say, with a laugh. "The curtain goes down!"

There was no one to mourn for the son of the Vandal.

"Let him rest," directed Morrell. "We have one thing more to do. We must look after the girl—the last of the Gaths, and I'll attend to her!" with a meaning grin.

He thereupon proceeded to the recess where Bianca had been borne, beyond the tunnel.

Reaching the spot, he looked for the guards set over her, but saw them not. Only one still form lay in the recess near the mouth of it.

He bent over this figure on the earth; then he made a start; it was one of the guards!

"Hi, there! This way! this way!" he shouted to his men without.

The light of the torches made all things plain.

Both of the men selected to care for the Vandal's daughter lay there in the silence of death, but Bianca was not visible.

Morrell was dazed for a moment, then he cried out:

"Who has done it? Who has dared—"

"The feller who took Yaller Gid out o' our clutches didn't feel bashful ter dare an' shoot at us, ef he did miss us all. Wal, I reckon he could pluck up courage ter do this job. See?"

The banker saw fully, and the thought of it caused him to express his feelings in most emphatic terms.

"Away an' look fer the girl, an' whoever has taken her!" he ordered. "There's a good reward fer the man who finds them. Some o' you see ter gettin' the senses back inter the heads o' these men, if so be they are not done for."

CHAPTER IX.

ANOTHER REWARD IS OFFERED.

The efforts to revive the unconscious men were soon successful. They were hard-headed fellows, and when they did return to consciousness an explanation was given.

"Mike an' me was hyar in the recess," one of the guards stated, "when some cuss crept up an' give et to us in the neck, an' he soon had us foul."

"He?" sharply repeated Morrell. "Do you mean that one man did you both up?"

"Why not? I tell you we got no show. We never was in it fer a minute. After he'd got in a few cracks we was rapped silly."

"Who was this, wonderful person? What did he look like?"

The answer was a description by which the stranger who had rescued Gideon was decided to be the man.

"The same feller who rescued Yaller Gid from us, by thunder!" exclaimed the banker. "Say, men, I'll give a cool two hundred dollars for that feller, dead or alive!"

The hunters were on the make, and the new offer was so encouraging that they greeted it with cheers. Nearly all rushed away after the banker had added a like reward for the recapture of Bianca Gath, but Morrell remained standing there in thoughtful silence.

"Who can this man be?" he wondered. "He seems ter have the faculty of doin'

about what he wishes, in spite o' the odds against him. Who is he that he cares so much fer Harmer Gath's tribe? He may make more trouble for me. There was no warrant for this bloody campaign against Gath! But, why do I argue against my own cause? I'll stand by what I've done!"

While all this was occurring, two men stood where they could look down and see the moving lights of the party. Close scrutiny would have revealed these persons to be Allen Graham and Peter Potts!

"Blame me!" exclaimed Peter, "but wouldn't I like ter go down an' make my mark on the critters! You knocked me all off my base when you insisted I should not do murder—that's what you called it—if I could help it. Wal, when I fired at them I didn't shoot ter kill, but I feel sorry of it now. Why, man, I could hev' winged about a dozen o' them as pretty as you ever did see!"

"I advised that the shedding of blood should be avoided, and I'm glad we did our work without breaking the rule. You did nobly, Mr. Potts."

Peter grimaced skeptically.

"Don't the murder o' the Gaths, father and son, deserve something in the way o' revenge?" he demanded.

"This night's work fills me with horror," confessed Allen, in a subdued voice. "There was absolutely no excuse for the deeds of bloodshed we have seen done here. Harmer Gath was no angel, certainly, but even his worst foes admitted there was no evidence to connect him with the murder of the man slain some time ago. Yet Harmer was hunted like a wolf, and slain accordingly."

"An' Yaller Gid?"

"Worse yet."

"They would hev' taken the gal hadn't we saved her."

"Poor Bianca! What now will become of her?"

Peter Potts rolled a quid of tobacco in his mouth.

"I know one man who is willin' ter resk his life fer her again as he has done before," he opined.

Allen clasped the rough hand of the sturdy speaker.

"Here is another, comrade! We cannot fill the place of those who have to-night lost their lives, but we can, at least, act a humane part. While we live Bianca shall not want for friends."

"Al, you're a daisy!"

Peter shook the other's hand with zeal, and from his throat there came a queer, guttural sound which could not well be classed under any head. It seemed, however, that the rude man was moved more than he would have admitted, and that under his rough exterior there beat a heart which many persons of more outward refinement might have envied.

"We seem to have shaken the enemy off permanently," remarked Allen, presently. "Shall we rest confident in that opinion and go to Bianca?"

"You don't want ter rest confident in nothin'," bluntly declared Potts. "Still, I reckon we may safely take a little time off, ez I don't see none o' the critters nigh us. Yes, let's go ter the gal an' see how she is comin' on."

"Poor Bianca!" sighed Allen, unconsciously.

They went some rods away, and to a recess among the rocks where they had left the rescued girl. Bianca had been nervous when they last saw her, and drowned in tears of woe for the loss of her father, but they hoped the lull had given her time to recover her self-possession in a measure.

In this they were not disappointed.

When they re-entered the recess she arose and met them with a composure which spoke well for her nerves.

Allen spoke kindly to her.

"I trust, Miss Gath, you are more composed, and will bear up bravely under this terrible occurrence."

"What have I to live for? Deprived of all my kindred by the remorseless men of Climax Camp, where is there a niche in life into which I may sink and hide myself and my sorrow?"

"We'll find the niche," declared Peter.

hastily. "Say it quick, Al; say it, an' don't keep her an' me in suspense!"

His zeal was amusing, but young Graham scarcely heard his words.

"Miss Gath, Mr. Potts and I fully realize your situation. The peculiar life you have led has kept you from making many acquaintances, and, as you have told me you have no other relatives, it is necessary that those who are your friends should rally to your aid. This is just what we crave the privilege of doing."

"You are very kind, but all I ask is the privilege of dying as my kindred have died!"

"No, no; do not say that! You must live—live for yourself and for your friends. Live to see a happier future!"

Bianca remembered the past. They had been friends—perhaps more than that. She had dreamed by night of their acquaintance, and dreamed of it by day.

"You are kind—you are more than kind," she exclaimed. "I thank you for what you say, and feel I have no right to speak as I do, but I cannot fully control myself now. My heart is heavy, it is very heavy!"

She broke down and her tears flowed afresh.

CHAPTER X.

DESOLATION.

Harmer Gath was dead, and it was clear that Bianca could no longer find a home on the Dark Divide range. It was equally clear she could not go to Climax Claim, for even if the people came to their senses, and saw the enormity of their course in persecuting a helpless girl, she could not endure existence there.

"Have you any place where you can find friends?" Allen at length asked.

"I had none except what you know of, and you know how it is now," she replied, with a sigh.

"And you, Mr. Potts?"

Peter rubbed his chin doubtfully.

"I'm a trifle afeerd my friends wouldn't suit her," he confessed. "You see, my friends ain't very high up in modern improvements." Then to Allen he added, in an aside, "Don't give it away, but my friends would scare her inter fits. They might steal the last cent she had ter her name, b'gosh! They are corksers, they be!"

Graham thought he understood.

"If you will rely upon me, Miss Gath, I will promise to find a refuge where you will be an honored guest, and all will be done that is possible to help you rally from the bereavement you have suffered."

"I thank you, and shall be glad to rely upon your kindness. I am, in truth, wholly without those to whom I would naturally apply for aid, and I could not refuse your offer if I would. But I have no desire to. I appreciate your goodness, and will accept with gratitude."

Young Graham felt that he had been well repaid for all he had done. Commendation from Bianca and her gratitude were all any one could desire, he thought, and he proceeded to outline his plan more in detail and tell of the other camp, not too near in point of safety, nor yet so far away that he could not watch over her until she had outgrown the strangeness of the new life.

Peter saw all these details arranged with much satisfaction, though he was wise enough to say but little. When there was no more to do, he abruptly asked:

"What about the time an' place? When is it ter be done?"

Allen hesitated.

"We kin easily avoid the p'izen enemy," pursued Peter. "We don't need ter tear our shirts off ter do things ez we want. We don't need ter leave the mountains o' Dark Divide ez ef we was in trainin' ter beat a jack-rabbit in a race. Wait a bit, an' let us settle all preliminaries hyar. First of all, let me go down an' see what is goin' on among the skunks we know of."

There was no objection to this, but Allen delayed him until he had drawn from the eccentric man a promise that he would do no act of violence.

"I'll obey your orders," assured Peter,

"but it would do me good to kill about twenty-seven o' them, b'gosh!"

Without explaining why his soul thirsted for the particular number he had named, Peter went down the slope. The lights of the hunters were a guide, and he was not long in getting into their immediate vicinity.

Peter had reported the death of Gideon Gath to those he had just left, but without any more evidence than the decision of the hunters, that he could not have survived the fall into the chasm. Peter wanted to know more about that matter, however, and luck favored him, for David Morrell was just having another search of the chasm made. If, by any possible chance, Yellow Gid had escaped, he was bound to know it.

The plan was not generally well thought of by the hunters.

"The canyon is bottomless," affirmed one. "You might as well try ter see the top-knots o' the Chinamen."

David did not take the opinion, but went ahead in his course. He had had torches tied together in a way to suit himself, and proposed to lower them so effectually that they would reveal any human being who might be in the region below. Of all this Peter also approved. He wanted light on the subject himself, and if Gideon was found, he stood ready to fight for him as stoutly as he had done before.

There was no necessity for it. The torches were lowered and an examination made which even Morrell was satisfied with, for he remarked:

"No human being could survive that fall. Gid Gath is dead, an' we needn't bother about him any more."

So they went to their beds of earth at a late hour, weary, but with the consciousness of having done a good night's work.

Luck had favored Peter. He had mingled with the gang in the dark, and he had been recognized by no one, and went back up the slope with slow steps.

"Yes, he's dead," muttered the mountaineer. "Et ain't no use ter think otherwise, an' the gal is all that's left o' the family. We must guard her well, me an' Al. She's left alone— Say, though, I almost wish I had lived a life so I could take her in my charge, an' find her a home, an' not hev' the ghost o' my past rise up ter spile it all. But we never think o' these things when we hev' a chance. The past can't be turned back; I won't try."

He returned to where Allen and Bianca were awaiting him, and the two men held a consultation. Bianca's future was discussed in all its bearings, and arranged as far as they could do that among themselves. They would take her to her new home and try to make her happy there. How far the plan would succeed they could not tell.

The dawn of day brought no change to them, but looking down the mountain they saw the crowd which had come from Climax Claim winding slowly down the range. The man-hunt was over, and they could now act as they saw fit, unembarrassed by the searchers.

Bianca soon made her appearance from where she had retired for rest while the two men kept guard. She showed traces of a sleepless night, but a certain kind of calmness was upon her. She had accepted the inevitable, as well as possible, and was ready for the future.

Both men greeted her in their most friendly way, and advised prompt departure from Dark Divide.

"There is a duty to be done before then," she replied, firmly.

"You refer to the finding of your father's body?"

"Yes, and my brother's."

Peter shook his head. He was sure the chasm would keep its prey.

They proceeded down the hill. Bianca knew every foot of the way, and they were soon at the scene of the tragedy. Somewhat to the surprise of all, the body was found undisturbed and unguarded, and Bianca was enabled to see her dead.

She bent over the rough-faced ex-Vandal and kissed his still lips.

"They did not know you as you were, father mine," she murmured, in a pathetic voice, which made the tears spring to Peter Potts's eyes. "In you they saw only the man who had robbed them of their gold in days gone past. They knew not what a good heart beat under your rough exterior. They saw not the loving father that was mine. They hunted you like a wild beast, and this is the end."

Peter touched Allen's arm.

"Say, this breaks me all up!" he declared, huskily.

But young Graham did not answer. His heart bled so for the bereaved girl that words failed him.

The men withdrew and left her alone for a time. Then she came to them with the old composure.

"Some one is liable to interrupt us if we delay, is there not?" she asked.

The suggestion was enough, and they went about the last services they could perform for dead Harmer Gath. The body was conveyed some distance away to a place which had been a favorite with him in the days gone by, and there a grave was hollowed in the earth and the old road-agent laid away in his last resting place.

"Next, let us think of my brother," then said the girl. "I have no hope of recovering the body. I know the chasm well—that is, as well as any one—and my father always represented it as one where sure death awaited us if we fell in by any mischance; and he said, too, that there was no end to the passage. I expect nothing from the search, but I can neglect no chance. Poor Gideon! Poor Gideon!"

"I have an idee that ef he had lived et would hev' been poor somebody else!" declared Peter. "I don't know the boy myself, but he was a lad o' nerve, an' I reckon he would hev' made et hot fer the p'izen skunks at Climax Claim ef he hadn't been took off ez he was. Yes, I reckon Yaller Gid would hev' gone in fer revenge."

Nobody answered the speaker, and his prophecy was left unnoted, but to be recalled later on.

The new search for Gideon's body succeeded no better than the first. Nothing was seen or ascertained to tell even of the whereabouts of the brother's body.

At noon the trio stood on an elevated point where they could look down and see the town in the valley. Under his arm Peter carried a large package. It contained all of the worldly goods Bianca had to take with her. With this poor outfit she was going out to face the world of which she knew so little.

Each of the little party realized the solemnity of the hour, and for once Peter had nothing to say.

Bianca looked down the valley and across the range where her whole life, since she was old enough to remember anything, had been passed, and the flood of recollections which rushed upon her for the time being destroyed the composure she had forced upon herself. Once she had had a mother there, and all the ties of home, even if Harmer Gath had been what he was, but all had gone; and with the past had gone the lives of all her kindred.

What wonder that she felt the bitterness and desolation of the hour!

"Let us go!" she said, at last. "There is no more to do here, and, at present, there is only sorrow in gazing on these scenes. I place myself wholly in your charge, and trust I may not be a burden upon you. It seems much to ask of you, though."

"Miss Gath," Allen quickly replied, "I have known you for some time, and our acquaintance has been without question or deceit. To me it will be a privilege tempered only with regret for your misfortunes that I can aid you in this."

"It is like you; you are of noble soul and most kindly heart."

"I will not deny that there is much of real selfishness in my course. I trust I would do as much for any one in need, but for you I do it most gladly, feeling that your confidence and friendship will repay me for all."

She placed her hand in his.
 "You are all I have left, now. But for you I should be alone. I thank you, I bless you for your kindness. Believe me, I will try not to prove ungrateful. I can say no more. Now, let us go on our way."

CHAPTER XI.

THE CALL OF ALARM.

Six months after the scenes already described, David Morrell sat in his office engaged in business affairs. He had made same changes in his office arrangements. Asher Bradstreet was no longer with him. Much to his surprise that useful employe had suddenly disappeared, and gone at a time most inconvenient to Mr. Morrell. The disappearance had come immediately after the expedition to Dark Divide, and Bradstreet never had been seen since that night.

Morrell had been surprised, at first, for he had not anticipated anything of the sort, but his daughter Rosamond had enlightened him, as he thought.

That young lady, not being overburdened with conscience, had deliberately stated that Asher had proposed to her and been rejected, and the lie seemed to show the cause of the clerk's disappearance. David set his man down as a fool, and went to work to get other help. This was not easy, for Asher had been a wonderfully clever and shrewd assistant, but the vacancy had been filled after a fashion, and business went on in the banking office.

On this particular day Mr. Morrell was very busy figuring up certain matters. The result did not seem to please him, and he went over the figures again and again, hoping to discover that he had made a mistake.

He could find none, and betrayed his anxiety.

"I don't like it!" he confessed, aloud.

He was not so rich a man as he had been six months before.

There had been losses—losses due to business rivalry and ventures, of which more will be said presently, and, also to causes which he could not understand. Matters were in a muddle, and he could not get them straight.

He had taken in a partner, but that person had not thus far been of any especial use. Passers-by noticed an addition to the sign over the door, and saw that it read Morrell & Levere. The vanity of Rosamond, and the vanity of her sire, had led to the French count being taken in as a partner.

It was generally known that the man was to marry, Miss Morrell, but Morrell, having found Levere lacking not only in experience, but in common shrewdness, was aware that his aid was not, and never would be, of any account.

This afternoon David was troubled—very much troubled in mind, as his demeanor and muttered anathemas proved.

Presently he took out his watch and looked at the time.

"They are nearly here," he remarked.

The junior partner entered the office.

Louis Levere was not an extraordinary-looking man, if he did rejoice in being the Count of Something-or-other. He was not large of stature, and, if looks went for anything, not large of intellect. His face was that of a man incapable of heroic or striking deeds of any kind. Practical men at Climax Claim had decided that he had nothing to lift him above mediocrity.

"I hope I haven't neglected business," he remarked, apologetically.

"Wal, how much of it have you done?" asked Morrell, somewhat curtly.

"Nothing, I confess, but I am all ready now."

"At four o'clock!"

"I didn't feel like work. I hope I haven't done any damage."

He might be a count, but he was very meek in the presence of his future father-in-law—so meek as to suggest the possibility that he was willing to put up with some hard usage for the sake of getting his share of the Morrell money.

David said nothing, so the partner added:

"Rosamond will soon be here."

"So she will," Morrell agreed. "I had forgotten it."

"Do you so easily forget your daughter?" asked Levere, trying to be playful.

David leaned back in his chair and regarded his companion with gravity.

"I am thinking of the twenty thousand dollars that are comin' by the same stage," he explained. "Levere, we need that money the worst way. If thar' should be any slip-up, I don't know what we should do."

"You don't anticipate any, do you?"

"I don't see how any can occur, now Harmer Gath is dead and out of the way—unless the disappearance of his body, that night, means that he came to life."

"He couldn't do that, of course, so I think we may reckon on the money getting here, sure."

"We need it; we need it bad. It beats thunder, Levere, how that fellow Girdwood has been cuttin' inter our profits. I can't understand it at all; I can't, by thunder! He seems ter see the turn of all money matters in advance, and the way he gets to business is a sort of David Morrell way improved and burnished up with tricks I ain't deep enough ter match, by thunder!"

The banker pulled viciously at his beard and looked very much demoralized.

"We ought to beat him, somehow!"

"Go ahead and do it! It's the methods of young blood that are workin' the mischief. Lasco Girdwood's way is much like Asher Bradstreet's, only more dashin' and bold. Thunder! but don't I wish I had Bradstreet with me, now!"

"What could he do?" almost sulkily demanded the "Count."

"Beat Girdwood, mebbe. Anyhow, he was a shrewd critter, an' that is just what we need now."

All this was not consoling to Mr. Levere. He walked to the window and looked out in evident ill-temper. Almost opposite to their own place he saw a sign which read:

"LASCO GIRDWOOD,

"BANKER."

And on the window was information which told of connection with big city banking houses, and with one each in London and Paris.

Levere returned to his desk and tried to forget all other matters than the arrival of Miss Morrell. She had gone away to secure wedding finery, and she and the finery were due on the stage which was to soon arrive.

Levere was an impatient lover, and hailed the home-coming with eager interest.

Morrell looked up from his papers.

"I'm red-hot to get that twenty thousand dollars!" he declared. "We are pinched like thunder, but it'll save us from the blow that might come without it. I wonder if Girdwood is responsible for all our troubles? Anyhow, the money will save us from any crash, now. Is the stage in sight?"

Levere arose and looked out.

"Nothing in sight but a horseman, who is tearing down the hill like mad."

The banker went on figuring, while his partner remained by the window and mechanically kept watch of the horseman.

The latter tore through the town at headlong speed and rapidly neared the office. Finally, he drew up before the door and sent forth a shout which was as plain to Morrell as if he had been prepared for it:

"Turn out, there! This way! News for you, an' the hottest kind o' news. Turn out!"

CHAPTER XII.

WILD WORK ON THE TRAIL.

Morrell started up nervously and sprang to his feet with a celerity which surprised the slow-witted count.

"Ho, Morrell!" called the horseman, "what are you dreamin' about? This way, an' hear the news!"

The banker was at the door before the last words were fairly out of the speaker's mouth.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"A road-agent on the trail, by mighty! That's what! The stage has been held up an' robbed jest accordin' ter the old-time plan, an' whoever has got—"

Morrell was very pale, and his face was convulsed with more than passing emotion.

"But the attempt was not a success? Tell me quick! Tell me it wasn't a success!"

"Et wa'n't fer us, but the other feller certainly thinks et was. He does, you bet, fer he's cleaned out the whole biz, includin' your gal's weddin' finery. I heerd her say so."

"All? Not the valuables—"

"Wal, I thought I made myself plain, but ef I didn't I'll say he did get the valuables, the mail, an' all the things which Jim Joyce had with him. Yes, siree, the stage is gutted in jest the good old style!"

David Morrell was a strong man usually, but he was weak then. He leaned against the door, and things seemed to swim around him. The stage robbed, and—the twenty thousand dollars! Where was that?

Levere came to his side and looked sympathetic.

"By Jove! this is hard!" he declared.

Morrell did not hear him. He was thinking of the lost money and the effect it would have on the business of the firm. He had relied upon it to help him out of his embarrassment, and now it was gone at one sweep.

The messenger resumed.

"The stage is at a stand-still in the hills. One o' the hosses was accidentally shot by Jim Joyce in tryin' ter resist, an' he can't get down. I've come ter you at Jim's request. What be you goin' ter do about it?"

The messenger was impatient, and his voice showed his mood. It served to awaken Morrell from his lethargy.

"My horse!" he exclaimed. "Ride for it, and have it brought hyar without delay. I'll go to the hills myself!"

He spoke as one accustomed to prompt action, and the words were scarcely uttered before the messenger was galloping away down the street.

Levere saw the pale face of his partner and thought he ought to say something.

"This is tough!" he remarked, weakly.

"Tough!" shouted Morrell. "Do you realize what you are sayin'? Do you realize what it means to us? I told you we were at low ebb, financially, an' that we needed that money as I never needed anything before. Now, where is it? Gone, that man says; gone, an' how do we stand? So you think it's tough! By thunder! I don't know but what it means financial ruin ter us!"

The violence of his emotion awed the weaker man, and he had nothing to say. The banker began to walk the room with quick and nervous steps. Delay was painful, and he longed for the coming of the horse.

He had not long to wait. His servant drove up with the turnout all ready, and David quickly entered. Levere followed, and the carriage whirled away toward the hills. The messenger galloped ahead.

The journey to the place of robbery was made in utter silence.

The stage was at a standstill, and one of the horses lay dead in the dust. The passengers were grouped around, looking angry and shocked, and among them was Rosamond.

Levere thought he knew his duty, and went to her side at once, but the senior partner had thought only of the lost treasure. He directed his gaze and his speech alike to the driver of the stage.

"Joyce, what has happened?" he demanded.

The driver made a sweeping motion toward the scene around them.

"Old times come ag'in," he explained, tersely.

"Was thar' a mail package directed to me?"

"Thar' was. For further pertic'lers see small bills, or the road-agent, ez we used ter say when this thing was common."

"Was it registered?"

"Sure, or I wouldn't hev' known et was fer you."

"Couldn't you have saved it?" demanded the banker, with a tremor in his voice.

"I took one shot, an' missed him by a hair. Hit the boss, instead, ez you kin see. After that I wa'n't in it."

"What was the road-robber like?"

"Like? Well, it's curious!" he declared. "Ef a certain chap wa'n't dead I should think mebbe it was him, fer, you see, this feller had hair ez yeller ez gold, an' it floated over his shoulders like a mantle."

Morrell was startled. "He had yeller hair?"

David seemed almost afraid of the answer, but it came promptly.

"Like Yeller Gid's."

The banker felt as if his heart were playing him false and turning into lead.

"But Yeller Gid is dead!"

"So you fellers who went onter the mountain said, but I notice you never perdoosed the body. Say, though, I s'pose I've seen Gid Gath more than any honest man in Climax Claim, an' I ought ter know him. Many's the time when I've been drivin' my old stage along hyar I've seen the boy swingin' from the face o' the cliff or prowlin' along the trail, or up ter some game or other. Wal, ef that robber wa'n't Gid Gath he looked enough like him ter be his double!"

"But Gid is dead."

"Ef you know that, it settles it."

"I don't know it. I wish I did."

David's mind went back to the time when the son of the Vandal had gone into the chasm, or was supposed to have done so. Could it be he had escaped death then? All of the old doubts returned to Morrell. He had been convinced against his will, then, and the fact that no positive proof of the yellow-haired man's death ever had been found looked ominous now.

"It's always been common talk that ef Yeller Gid had lived thar' would hev' been hot times at Climax Claim," added Joyce, "an' it hez the look now that the prophecy is ter come true. Yes, I do reckon it was Yeller Gid who did it. Thar's a new Vandal in Dark Divide!"

"Describe the man in detail," cried the banker.

"He's a dashin'-lookin' chap, I do declare. He was dressed like a king. None o' the old, shabby clothes that Harmer Gath wore was on this lad. I can't tell the stuff they was made of, but he just glittered with gorgeousness. Then he had a hoss that was a jim-dandy, and rode him like a master. An' his yeller hair was jest great! Oh! it was Gid Gath, sure!"

"It don't seem possible!"

"Et is possible, an' ef I don't mistake the run o' the Gath blood, the new Vandal will prove his speed inside a month."

Morrell moved uneasily. He had his share of sand, but now he shivered as with dread or actual terror.

"Right hyar he met us," explained Joyce. "Thar' was no warnin'. I wa'n't prepared fer sech a thing, an' hadn't my gun where I could use it quick."

"He pounced on us at this point, comin' out with a rush, his hoss right on edge, an' his own yeller hair streamin' out behind him like a pennant."

"I ain't no sassiety belle, but I do aver an' asseverate he looked fit fer an Apoller."

"He was likewise some on the Ajax line. He jest held us up where we was, gun in hand, an' ordered us ter fork over. I got one shot an' missed; then he knocked the revolver out o' my hand an' had it all his own way. Them other chaps hadn't sand enough ter put in their oar, an' I reckon they was dazed."

"That's the way Yeller Gid did us up!"

CHAPTER XIII.

ANOTHER VANDAL HUNT.

The banker said nothing. He was staring at vacancy in a way which showed how hard he was hit. His money was gone. What next? How was he to get out of the dilemma which menaced him? How meet the indebtedness which must be met or succumbed to?

Rosamond approached, with Levere clinging to her arm. She was pale and tear-stained.

"Oh, father!" she exclaimed, "all the things I had bought are gone!"

"Let them go to thunder!" growled David, fiercely.

"But all my trouble—"

"Hang you an' your trouble!"

"Sir!" warned Mr. Levere, "please remember this lady is your daughter and my promised wife!"

"Pah! Get out of my sight, or keep your mouth shut! I have no time for nonsense!"

The irate man seemed about as dangerous then as the road-agent.

"Put my horse in the team and get back to the town," he ordered. "You, Dan Stebbins, ride back an' arouse the people. We must have a search party out as soon as possible. Tell them there is to be a reward. Away, man!"

Without question Dan went galloping down the hill.

Joyce did not delay about getting the new horse into use, and soon had the stage ready to move on again.

All entered except a single passenger who had remained wholly in the background during this interview. He got up on the box with the driver, so the banker's attention was not called to him.

All was excitement at Climax Claim. The news had spread fast. The first feeling was one of surprise that such a bold deed had been committed, but the people were ready for action when the stage rolled in.

They remembered how often the comment had been made that if the old Vandal's son had not died on the same night with his father there would have been wild scenes along the Dark Divide range.

And he lived, after all!

There was not much for Morrell to do after he arrived. Mention of a reward had been enough to arouse the cupidity of all, and he had but to give some system to their work.

In a short time the party moved on its way—moved to find Yellow Gid. Good horses were at a premium, and they bade fair to be ridden hotly.

Among those who did not go was the passenger on the driver's box. He watched the man-hunters depart with a sneer on his face.

This person was of middle age, and a tall and slenderly formed individual, though he seemed to have muscle enough. He was of dark complexion, and his black hair was long and wild, like that of an Indian. His face was thin and hawk-like, while his dark eyes were strangely sharp and penetrating.

He watched the riders wind up the hill and disappear, and then walked slowly away in the town. He seemed to be looking for something, and finally accosted one of the citizens who had remained behind.

"Whose house is that over yonder?"

"David Morrell's."

"I thought so. All right!"

And he walked toward the house.

CHAPTER XIV.

GAD.

The dark-faced man proceeded direct to David Morrell's house, and, walking calmly up on the piazza, sat down there. Then he lighted a cigar and proceeded to make himself comfortable.

Junius Green, the servant, saw him. Junius was nothing if not polite and hospitable, and though he did not know the person, he took it for granted the stranger had a right to be there, and went out and accosted him.

"Mr. Morrell is away, jest now, sah. Can I do anything fer you?"

"Well, yes; you might get an ottoman for my feet," calmly replied the gentleman.

"Beg pardon, sah, but we don't keep them things."

"Don't, eh? Well, he will, or my name ain't Gad Jackling."

"Yes, Mister Jackling," was all the astonished Junius could say.

"Dave sent for me," went on the

stranger, and I have come to the divine town of Climax Claim to see the beauties of the place, human and otherwise, and Dave will be my guide, friend, monitor and coacher, as I may say. See?"

Junius replied that he did, though he was by no means sure of what he said. Mr. Gad Jackling impressed him as being a walking sneer. The man had a way of looking at him which confused and worried Junius. The stranger's piercing eyes were not the kind Junius cared to meet.

"I have come on here to rest while he goes out to catch the bold and wicked road-agent," pursued Mr. Jackling. "Have you any idea what the average time is for the catching of a road-agent?"

Junius was positively bewildered.

"I'll bet Dave beats the record. What that chap can't do isn't worth doing. A rare old bird is Dave Morrell. Don't you think so?"

"He's a very smart man, sah."

"Bless you, yes. A holy terror is David when it comes to smartness."

Mr. Jackling's thin, long mustache seemed to rise with the force of his enthusiasm. He looked so queer and uncanny that Junius grew more than ever unfavorably impressed.

"Can I do anything for you?" he asked, faintly.

"Nothing, my dear friend."

Junius retreated to the interior.

"He gives me the nightmare," muttered the servitor. "Never did see a feller like him. What can the master be thinking of to have such a friend?"

Gad Jackling kept his seat on the piazza. No one disturbed his solitude, and he sat and smoked until, as night drew near, the hunters of the road-agent began to arrive in small groups from the hills of Dark Divide.

"No signs of the bold and audacious robber!" murmured Mr. Jackling. "Singular! I did imagine Dave would get him at first pop."

The old smile was visible then, and it seemed to have come to stay. One of the latest hunters to arrive was Morrell himself. It was fully dark when he put in an appearance. For a while he delayed in the center of the town, but finally approached his own home.

He had never been in worse humor.

To all the troubles he had taken away with him was added that of failure and utter mental weariness, and he had been so ugly to even his own helpers that they had not found life pleasant with him.

In the semi-darkness he did not see Jackling, and that person made no haste to accost him. Thus the banker entered the house and received his first news from Junius. The latter looked once on his employer, and decided it would not be wise to ask how the search had resulted, but he thought he could say something more agreeable.

"The gentleman is still on the piazza, sah. He did not accept my invitation to come in."

"Eh? What gentleman?"

"I think he said his name was Jackling, or something like it."

"Never heard o' the man in my life."

"He's been waiting a long time, and he's there now," explained Junius, in fresh bewilderment.

"He is, eh? Wal, I'll see that chap!"

He found Jackling lazily smoking on the piazza, and pounced on him at once, figuratively.

"What are you doin' hyar?"

Gad Jackling looked up calmly.

"I was trying to think of the name of that group of stars over in the west. My astronomical lore has about gone back on me. Is the group Aries or Capricornus, or are both of them somewhere else?"

"Devil take you and your infernal Capricornus!" almost shouted Morrell. "I say, who are you, and why are you hangin' around hyar?"

He was still more angry, but the stranger very placidly answered:

"I was waiting for you. You see, I came in on the stage, and—"

"I don't care whether you did or not; you can't stay hyar, an' the sooner you get out o' hyar the better it will be for

you. Get, or I'll call a servant and have him set the dog on you!"

Junius, listening near at hand, was surprised at the violence of his master's passion, but what Gad Jackling then did double discounted the outburst.

That person drew from his pocket a roll of money.

"Dave," said he, calmly, "I'll bet you to the extent of my pile that you don't set the dog on me, or make me unwelcome. I'll bet you again that you will ask me to stay in your house as your guest if I ask for the chance. Is it a go?"

The reply was slow in coming. Something about the stranger's manner gave David an unpleasant feeling, as if he was not quite sure of his own position. Was this person only bluffing, or did he have some secret power which made him feel all he claimed?

"I am not here to bet," the banker finally replied. "I am a business man. I want an answer to my question."

"I have forgotten what the question was, if you asked any, but if you will incline your left ear this way I will whisper the magic password into it. Thus!"

Jackling leaned forward a little, and did whisper something. What it was Junius did not hear, but Morrell at once became a different man. His tongue did not voice any ready and abusive retort, and he remained staring at Gad in silence. The darkness hid whatever was expressed in his face.

"Suppose," calmly suggested Jackling, "that we go in and have supper, and then talk this over. We may do a good bit of business. If one of us is willing to sell and the other to buy, I don't see why we should not be mutually interested in the conversation. What do you say—are we to talk?"

Jackling arose languidly, as if he had no especial interest in the matter, and his companion turned toward the door. Junius thought there was no call for him to be visible, and he wisely retreated to a prudent distance. Thus there was nothing to show that the preliminary skirmish had been overheard.

Morrell's steps were slow and heavy as he led the way in, while the unwelcome caller developed a buoyancy of motion quite the reverse. It seemed as if, whatever might be done later on, they already realized that one was master and the other the mastered.

Junius was found; the order for supper duly given, and then the men went on to the room the host had selected.

Morrell himself struck the light in the room. Not much behind them was the serving of the meal, for all had been in waiting, but when it was there the banker did not offer to begin. He sat looking at Jackling with a troubled expression.

"I never saw you before," he remarked, almost unconsciously.

"That's right."

"Am I known to you?"

"You shall hear when I get to work."

"I don't see what you can know—"

"I am here to tell you," declared Gad, calmly. "First, let us get to work on the eatables."

"I do not care to eat."

"I do, and I think I can work for both of us. Sit down, David, and while you rest I will do the remainder of it. You must be all fagged out chasing that road-agent. Where did you catch him?"

"He is not caught."

"No? I thought you went out for that especial purpose."

"We saw no signs of the man."

"That's bad. I came in on the stage, and was robbed of a paper collar, a toothbrush, a finger-nail cleaner, and all my other baggage. It is tough on a fellow, and I hope you'll catch the audacious robber and string him up to the nearest tree, according to Judge Lynch methods."

David winced. He did not have the same admiration for Judge Lynch methods as before the rumor came that Gideon Gath was alive.

Mr. Jackling was eating with relish. The supper was good, if it had been kept waiting, and he gave it the attention of a hungry traveler.

He continued to talk while Morrell as attentively watched him. The latter was still in the dark. He did not know his man, and the visitor had unfolded only enough of the secret at which he had hinted to make the banker uncertain as to the extent of his power. So David waited.

When his visitor had finished he calmly lighted another cigar and leaned back in his chair with an air of comfort.

"You live in clover here, Dave," he remarked.

"You had something to say to me, sir," suggested the banker. "I am all attention."

Gad, for a while, seemed to deliberate; then he slowly produced from his pocket a package, small and compact. What it was could not be told; it was covered with oiled silk.

Quietly undoing the wrapper, he revealed a rope, slender and fine of texture.

With a cast as skillful as that of a practiced lassoer he flung the rope out so it made a long, crooked line on the floor.

"Understand?" questioned Jackling, with a smile.

"I do not."

"This is the identical rope that hanged Stephen Darrow!"

With a cry Morrell started up from his chair. To some the remark might have had no especial meaning; to him it had much. This was evident in every way. Alarm was expressed in every feature of his coarse face, and the pallor had grown distinct and impressive.

"He was hanged until dead!" calmly added Gad Jackling.

Still the banker said nothing. The rope seemed to fascinate him, and he looked at it instead of at its owner. Gad, however, saw only him, and the smile on his face spread and grew to a magnified sneer.

"How do you like it?" he finally asked. "Does the memory of old times seem pleasant to you? Do you read the story of the rope?"

CHAPTER XV.

THE FATAL ROPE.

David Morrell began to have some idea of what he had to expect, but his ugliness of nature asserted itself at once.

"I do not read the story of the rope," he answered. "I haven't the slightest idea of what you are drivin' at, and unless you can make yourself plain you can get away as soon as you wish."

"I think I can make myself plain. I will try, anyhow. I told you I had produced the rope which hanged Stephen Darrow. You certainly remember Stephen?"

"I do not!" averred the banker.

"Badly answered. By denying too much you hurt your cause, or would, if there was any doubt. There is none. I have it all down fine, and will prove what I say. The case was not one like the delightful story I heard coming in on the stage, which told how you sent the lynchers after a family here and wiped them out of existence—what was the name? Was it Gath? I think so. This case was different."

The speaker gathered up the rope, and, with a sudden cast, flung it out again so deftly that it coiled around David's neck like a serpent.

Morrell uttered a cry of real terror, whereupon Jackling smiled his old smile and waited patiently until David recovered enough to throw the thing off.

Gad, showing no surprise, gathered up the rope again, and went on talking with his cool utterance.

"Stephen Darrow, as you and I well know, was a man of more than ordinary importance in your life. He had associations with you which were all to your good. He had but little he could gain therefrom; you could, and did, gain much—how much I will not pause to recount."

"Leaving all other things, for we know the story so well it need not be repeated, let me tell how Stephen Darrow died, not because you are ignorant of the facts, but because I must let you see I know all about it."

"One night you and Darrow were in a

room with nobody near to see or watch—so you thought, and so we will imagine, for the time being. If my story develops another state of affairs, it is but a passing event."

"You and he were in the room. He was an honest man, and knew no reason why you should not feel as much good-will toward him as he did toward you."

"You were there with a certain thought, a certain ambition, in your mind, and circumstances made it possible for you to carry your plans out to the letter."

"You crept up to Darrow as he sat looking at other things, and in your hand you held a rope. It was no new implement with you, for you had roughed it the world over and done your share of work with all the tools which bring a living to men of your caliber."

"I imagine you held the rope something like this!"

Gad Jackling had deftly coiled nearly all of the thing with which he illustrated, and made a noose in the free end. Now he held it to suit himself and revealed his idea.

Morrell watched in a mood like the fascination thrown upon one by a snake. His parted lips were expressive of his breathless, though painful interest.

His companion crept toward the table, rope in hand, and seemed to be looking at some one seated there. His advance was impressive, and he did not spoil it by carrying the pantomime too far.

Suddenly he stopped.

"Thus you did the work. Darrow saw you not, and the result was easy."

"You cast the cord over his head; you drew it tight; you baffled his every attempt to escape. It was soon over. You had muscle enough to keep your hold. Stephen Darrow died!"

"When it was over you saw there must be some artifice to avert suspicion—not that you would naturally be suspected, but somebody would be if things were left to themselves, and there were weak points in your armor which investigation might develop."

"The free end of the rope you flung over the rafter of the unfinished room and hauled away. Stephen Darrow rose and was suspended by the neck. When found it was said he had committed suicide. You knew how true that was, but you gave no sign."

"He was buried as a suicide, and so the world has believed thus far. What would it say if it was known you had murdered him?"

Gad Jackling ceased. The importance of prompt action was so apparent to Morrell that he made a desperate effort to rally.

"If you expect to gain anything by this outrageous lie you will get badly left!" he declared. "You have yourself admitted that the verdict was that he died by suicide. Well, even if I was guilty, which I am not, where would you get the proof against me?"

"You hev' come hyar an' charged me with crime," pursued Morrell, with an increase of courage. "You hev' come ter the wrong shop. Who are you that you can come inter Climax Claim an' swear my good name away? Ef you try it, by thunder, I'll make you wish you'd never been born! Yes, I'll hev' you arrested an'—"

"Hanged with this rope?" questioned Gad, with a sneer, and a flirt of the rope.

"Perhaps I will!" retorted David, hotly.

"I doubt it. Such a thing might be, possibly, but you would not live to see it. If you move you certainly seal your own doom, whether you do mine or not."

"I'll show you! I'll hev' you know I run this town myself; that when I say the word, things go my way. I tell the people ter go, an' they go. I tell them ter come, an' they come! That's the style at Climax Claim. Ef I say ter them, 'Hang this man!' they will do it; an' I swear ter you I'll say it ef you meddle hyar. By thunder! I'll do et anyhow, ef you don't get out o' town before mornin'!"

The banker had seemingly regained the mastery, but the slow smile of his companion never changed.

"Wrong, Dave! You will do nothing of the sort, for it would be rank suicide if you did."

"By thunder! I'll show you; I'll—"

"You'll do nothing!" repeated Gad Jackling, unmoved. "Even if you should have me assassinated during the night—a deed of which you are quite capable—you would gain nothing thereby. I have left certain papers with friends of mine. They are sealed papers, and will not be opened if all goes well with me; but let me disappear and there will be music along Dark Divide! The papers will be opened, and you will go out like a tallow candle. Not only will your scheme to suppress the old evidence have failed, but you'll have a more modern murder to answer for. On the whole, you had better go light!"

Gad flung several documents upon the table.

"Duplicates!" he remarked. "Read them, and see what the originals will do if used."

His manner crushed down David's rebellion, and the latter's air was again that of a man on the defensive tamed as he took up the package.

Whatever was in the papers it seemed conclusive. His face visibly paled as he read, and Jackling, watching slyly, knew what the result would be before Morrell ceased his investigation.

"Where did you get these?" he asked.

"No matter. I have them, and that's enough. How do they please you? How do they fit in with this?"

Jackling again twirled the rope, almost catching the other in the coils, and then smiled at the manifest start.

"The rope which hanged Stephen Dar-row!" he suggested.

"What do you want?" Morrell demanded, sullenly, yet coweringly.

"Now you talk business, and I will be frank. I am going to stay a while in this town. Were I a man of cheek I might demand quarters at your house, but I am not constructed on that plan. I shall go to the hotel and be a private citizen, though I may occasionally mention that I am a friend of yours. I won't embarrass you, however."

A furtive light came into David's eyes. This reprieve might be the means of his turning the tables upon his enemy!

A smile stole over Gad's face. He well enough knew that mischief was being plotted.

Jackling arose, flirled the rope about a little more, and then coiled it up.

"A memento of the way Stephen Dar-row was hanged!" he observed, as he proceeded to put it in the bag again!

This done, he delayed no longer. His manner was matter-of-fact as he left the house.

Left alone, the banker suddenly became the man of fire.

"He shall die!" was the decision.

CHAPTER XVI.

TROUBLESOME GID GATH.

Near the western side of the town was the residence of Allen Graham's father, in which the young man made his own home. To this house, late at night, and shortly after Gad Jackling had left David Morrell, came a man. He walked boldly, yet with evident caution. A solitary light burned in the house, and he advanced and knocked at the door.

It so happened that Allen himself was up, and he answered the knock.

"Peter Potts!" he exclaimed, cordially.

"Et ain't nobody else," agreed the caller. "The same old Potts you've seed afore."

"You are welcome. Come in! You are the man of all men I wanted to see."

"Wal, I want ter see you, too, or somebody who kin give me the cash ter replenish my wardrobe. It's a trifle out o' kilter," and Peter looked down at a very ragged suit of clothes, whereupon Allen smiled quietly.

"You do seem in hard luck, but I will remedy that. First of all, though, let us speak of another matter. Come in!"

They were already in the hall, but Allen led the way to the room where he had

been sitting. There he placed a chair for Peter.

The latter was more rough and gnarled of appearance than he had been six months before. His clothes were in rags, and his boots worn so they barely covered his feet. This surprised Allen, for Peter had had both decent clothes and money when they were together before.

"Peter, where've you been?" the young man demanded, abruptly.

"All over the lots, old man," was the calm answer.

"How long have you been in Climax Claim?"

"Two hours, mebba."

"Have you heard the news of the robbery of the stage, and the report that it was Yellow Gid who did it?"

Peter nodded, and the two looked at each other in silence for several seconds. Then Potts replied:

"I hev' heard that little story, my frien', an' I must say it's amazin'. I arrived at town sence et all happened, but I dropped inter a place fer supper an' got the story with my grub, two men bein' talkin' et over. Al, you're right on the ground, an' I ain't been. What do ye think of it?"

"We once decided that Gideon Gath must be dead, but now, Peter, I want your opinion. Ever since this affair happened I have been wrestling with the conundrum, Can it be that Gideon escaped death?"

"One o' two things is correct; he did so escape, or somebody is usin' a disguise ter work up an excitement an' get more glory by makin' folks think he's really Yeller Gid."

"If it is Gid, why has he not made himself known?"

"To whom?"

"Sure enough! Bianca was his last relative, and we took her away. He had no means of knowing where she was. He had no friends, as far as we know, here, so to whom should he reveal the fact that he was alive? But it seems impossible that he should be alive! But if it really is he, it can mean but one thing—that we are about to enter upon a new reign of outlawry, so the most important question to us now is, can we restore him to his sister and save him from the mad step he seems bound to take? You and I, Peter, are interested in the future of Bianca Gath, and if her brother is alive and madly bent on following such a mad course we must save him from his insanity. Road-robbery is a great crime!"

"Al, read that!" and Peter handed over a newspaper clipping, as if he had received some shock in what his companion said.

Allen took the article and read as follows:

"ESCAPED."

"When Jailer Kennedy went to the lock-up yesterday morning, with breakfast for the supposed road-agent, Ben Brett, who has been in the place for a month, waiting for somebody who could positively identify him, he found no prisoner to feed. During the night the fellow had succeeded in making good his escape."

"Whether the man really was Ben Brett remains an open question. He has all along denied his identity, eaten well of the good things set before him, and seemed perfectly happy."

"Numberless persons have seen him, but the difference of opinion has prevented any one from deciding whether he was the road-agent or not."

"Ben Brett's career has been one of note. He got away with a good deal of gold, and, on the whole, had a pile of fun."

"He was a happy-dispositioned chap, and always left some good joke to make up for the nuggets and coin he took. He ran his race until Chipper Run got too much populated to make his calling and election sure; then he dusted just as we were thinking to gobble the scamp and string him up to a tree. He was gone, but not forgotten—so we thought, then; but when we got this late arrival in jail the editor hereof will be dog-goned if we could tell whether we had the old Ben or not."

"If this Ben was not the real Ben, will the real Ben please forward what he stole from the editor hereof, five years ago? It will fill a long-felt want, which is near where our pocketbook ought to be."

Allen looked up. "What do you think of this, Peter—anything?"

"A good deal. They did have good grub in the jail."

"Do you mean that you were the man confined there?"

"I was, for a dead-sure fact."

"I trust you were not Ben Brett?"

"I was just that individual."

Peter, nonchalant as ever, broke into a hearty laugh.

"I'll call at that editor's office, some day, and have a talk with him. He seems ter be a right decent feller. Now, you'll see why I ain't been around ter see you an' our joint ward. It wasn't neglect, but the pressure of business an' ropes, manacles, an' sech. I tell all this ter you frankly, fer I know you're an old friend. I like you, too. Blame et, but you ought ter hev' been with me when I was on the trail as a bold road-agent!"

Peter laughed again, but quickly became serious and dropped himself as a subject of conversation.

"What be we ter do about Yeller Gid?" he added.

Allen arose and began walking across the floor in a nervous and excited way. Yellow Gid was Bianca's brother, and if he lived he was her last relative. It would be a terrible blow to her if harm came to him. Again, what would it be to Allen Graham, with his spotless record and good family, and his high hopes for the future, if the woman he loved had a brother, who, perhaps, was yet to be lynched as an outlaw?

Actual horror was in the young man's mind.

Stopping after a troubled promenade, he sat down nearer yet to his companion.

"Peter," he said, "you are skillful in the ways of the mountain. There is work for you to do now!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MYSTERIOUS BOX.

"Gideon Gath must be found!" earnestly asserted Allen. "You are the man of all men to do the work. Experienced in the details of trail-following and the like, you can succeed where I should fail utterly. Will you find him?"

"I reckon you're speakin' a couple o' words fer ye'self!" dryly suggested Mr. Pott's

"I am—and for Bianca. Gid Gath I don't know, but he must not be allowed to disgrace his sister and—her friends. You see I am frank."

"I'm with ye, but not wholly fer the reasons you give. The boy is likely to come ter grief ef he keeps this thing up. He must be saved, an' we are the only ones ter do it."

"Can you find him?"

"I reckon I kin."

"Do it, then, and without delay. Take to the range, and let not your zeal flag until you have found him. You are in poor financial circumstances. I will clothe you; I will furnish money and all else you need. Your only work is to find him, but do it soon; do it before the mad boy has done further deeds of madness!"

Allen spoke with considerable feeling, and Peter took his hand and shook it warmly.

"I'm with you, Al; I'm with you, an' I'll do my duty. I'll find him, an' you shall instill burnin' words o' wisdom inter his benighted brain-pan."

There was reason to doubt that the speaker was in full earnest, for he could not look upon road-agency as such a vast crime when he had himself followed it for so long, but he was sincere in his desire and promise to aid Allen fully.

They conversed for some time further. Peter had no fear, he declared, of being found there by those who were looking for Ben Brett, so he could move about freely.

All seemed favorable for his new work. Graham gave him money, and, after a

long talk, he left the house. That night he would sleep, he declared, in a recess among the rocks. The next, respectably dressed, he could go to the hotel and make no comments possible by the change in his appearance.

When again alone, Allen walked the floor for a time and meditated deeply.

The pity he had felt for Gideon Gath had grown subordinate to other things. Matters had put him in a very painful situation, and he was trying desperately to work his way out. Darkness was around him, and he was not sure of his ability to get out of it. The acquaintance with the Gath family might yet prove a serious blow to him and his happiness.

Suddenly he stopped in his walk.

"What's that?" he muttered.

It had been a rap at the door, and he knew it, but it had been so unexpected, and the hour was so late, that he did not take it with the calmness of such a thing occurring earlier in the evening.

The knock was repeated, and Allen did not delay. He opened the door, to be astonished and alarmed, for before him stood a man whose whole face was concealed by a mask—not the caricature of a mask seen in stage-plays, but a concern which covered all of its owner's face and made him unrecognizable even to his best friend.

This midnight caller at once spoke.

"Do not be alarmed. I am not here as an enemy. Can I come in and have a talk with you, Mr. Graham?"

"What's your business?" Allen sharply asked. "Honest men are not in the habit of going around this town equipped as you are. You may mean well, and you may not."

"My business I cannot explain here. It must be done within, or not at all. Further, I'll swear to you that I intend no harm!"

"You interest me with your strange togery, and I'll hear you. Come in!"

They entered, and the Man-in-the-Mask sat down in the chair vacated by Peter Potts.

"Mr. Graham," he began at once, "you are curious to know who I am, are you not?"

"I certainly am."

"You must remain in doubt!"

"Why? A man who comes to see me at such an hour should give good reasons for it in order to establish his claims to be heard."

"Granted! Yet I am here to ask a favor of you, and to ask you to remain blindfolded, as it were. Be patient, sir, for I assure you the cause is a good one. Now, listen to me carefully. Are you willing to do a good act in a good cause?"

There was a persuasive something in the voice of the unknown which was not without effect upon the young man. He began to be curious to learn what was wanted, and his permission followed as a result.

"Mr. Graham," pursued the visitor, "you are an honest man. Common rumor says so, and I know it to be true. Such being the case, I wish to make you the custodian of another matter of honor."

From his coat the stranger brought out a small box and held it up to view.

"Will you receive and keep this?" he asked.

"What is in it?"

"I know, but I cannot tell."

He passed the box over to Allen, who was surprised to find it very heavy. It seemed nearly solid. It was not a showy article, except with its suggestion of being made of silver. A fine line marked where the lid closed down, but no key-hole was visible, and no way to open it.

"Will you keep it?" asked the visitor.

"For how long?"

"Until called for. It may be a week, or it may be a month or more. When I call for it you are to surrender it, and not before."

"Do you know you are asking an extraordinary thing of me? Why should I comply with your request?"

"Because the honor of a man is at stake."

For the first time the unknown showed some emotion. He leaned forward in his

chair, and there was anxiety in his heretofore even voice.

"Do I know this man?" Allen asked.

"No."

"Then why am I selected as the custodian of his 'honor,' as you term it?"

"Because you are honest, too."

"Has he no friends who are honest? Surely they should be the ones to rally to his aid, not I. If this thing is important, you are doing wrong to hand it over to an entire stranger."

"All that has been carefully considered, and you have been selected as the custodian of the box."

"I object to doing anything blindfolded. In the present case there is much of doubt and uncertainty. How am I to know the box does not contain something which, if I once got it into my possession, would do me harm? In brief, how do I know your request does not hide some attempt to get me into trouble?"

"You have my word of honor such is not the case."

"And you are—who?"

"I cannot tell you who I am, nor can I give you any light as to the matters at stake. If you believe me you will take my word that it is as I say. I swear to you that the honor of a man is at stake, and you can save him from possible great harm by complying with my request. There is nothing in the box, or in the matter, as a whole, which need give you one moment of uneasiness. If you take it, you do a good deed you never will regret. I avow that to be true."

He took it from Allen's hand, and impressively added:

"The honor of a man. You can save it without risk to yourself. Will you do it?"

The idea began to grow upon Allen. The fast-closed box was a curiosity of no common kind. What was in it? What did all this secrecy mean? Was the affair worth following?

Allen obeyed the sudden prompting:

"I will shoulder the mystery and the trust. I will take the box!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A GIRL IN THE WAY.

The masked man grasped Allen's hand.

"You have done something for which you will one day be glad!" he exclaimed.

"If I cannot explain now, it is not because of a guilty secret to hide. Speaking for the man whose honor is at stake, I will say he is actuated by the best of motives, and you will have charge of the vital part of his secret."

"And you are to call for it?"

"It may be a month; it may be six months. I may call occasionally, add to what is in it, or take away from it. All is uncertainty. Again, you may be called upon to open it under circumstances I will now mention—open it yourself, you understand."

"But you say I can't do it?"

"You can by breaking it open. Now, listen attentively: Once in every week you will see me or receive by mail a note signed 'Moloch.' If over ten days passes without some sign from me—from Moloch—you are to break the box, anyhow. Understand?"

"I do, but why break it?"

"To get at its contents. Once seen, you will make use of the information seen within, according to directions."

The mystery was deepening, and Allen was not pleased.

"I don't like the job."

"Remember your promise!"

"I forget nothing. If you say the word, I hold to your property."

Once more the man leaned forward and shook Allen's hand.

"Friend!" he exclaimed, "you shall never regret this, if I can control future events. I am grateful; I am very grateful!"

He seemed about to say more, but suddenly arose.

As he stood there Allen was impressed by his manly appearance. Himself of muscular and powerful build, the stranger towered above him. Add to this that his manner had at all times been grave, dignified

and firm, and he could but command respect.

At the door he paused once more.

"I have given unto you a sacred trust," he remarked, his voice wavering a trifle; "and may your every effort be directed to keeping it as such. I have the fullest trust that you will do so."

"You do me no more than justice," seriously answered Allen. "Having accepted it, I should be despicable if I proved false to the confidence."

"I thank you, Mr. Graham; I thank you."

Impulsively the stranger again shook Allen's hand, and passing quickly out, disappeared in the darkness.

The box stood on the table. Allen picked it up and examined it carefully, but no more was to be learned. What did it contain?

"This 'Moloch,' whoever he is, is not a man to deal in things nonsensical. His nature is stern and practical. He knows what he is about. He has a strong motive in his course. What is it? To whom and to what have I linked myself?"

That night he slept but little, and in the morning went down to the breakfast table with a heavy heart. His father was there, looking cheerful and happy.

"I thought you were going to be late," the elder man observed. "You see, there is no relying upon a lover."

Allen forced a smile, but it was not a radiant one.

"I, at least, am on time, sir."

"True, and all ready for our journey, I dare say."

"Yes, sir."

"I shall be glad to receive and know your chosen lady. The occasion is one always of interest. Well do I remember my own youth, when your sainted mother was the star of my life. Most men grow callous to the aims, hopes and ambitions of the young as soon as their own youth fades away, but it is not so with me. You have my sincere sympathy, my son!"

Mr. Graham reached out and shook Allen's hand cordially, and the latter was much moved.

"You are very kind, sir!" he replied.

"That's because I have faith in your judgment. I am sure you would select no one who would discredit our name. I am not given to undue pride, but honor is something I highly prize. I have been in this town many years now, and nobody can say aught against me. The same applies to you, my boy. Honor is the pearl above price, and I feel sure your bride-elect will uphold all our endeavors. But let us to breakfast, and then prepare for the journey."

Allen was glad to have the subject dropped.

They ate in a thoughtful mood, and then the younger man went to his own room again.

"How will it end?" he exclaimed, feverishly. "How will it end?"

The question was a momentous one with him. That day they were going away to call upon Bianca Gath—or Alice Mayton, as she had been known of late. Affairs had progressed so rapidly between her and Allen that they were engaged, and the latter's father had been informed of the fact.

Not yet had Allen dared to inform his father who she was, and, being well aware that there would be strong opposition, he had laid a plan by which she was to win her way in the elder man's good graces before anything was said.

This day they were to go to where she was staying, and bring her to the Graham home. By the time she had been there a few days Allen believed she would have a standing with Horace Graham so that it would no longer be risky to reveal her identity.

"He must love her; he cannot help it!" the lover had always assured himself; but the events of the previous day had upset all his plans.

If Bianca came she would hear the story that Yellow Gid was alive, and, certainly, she would not be willing to rest easy under such circumstances, nor was it probable that she could, if she would, re-

main in the house to keep up the show of indifference. So the case grew dark, and Allen wished the proposed visit to Climax Claim well out of the way.

How could he keep both Bianca and his father ignorant of the facts?

The journey must be taken, and he prepared for it. Before leaving the town they paused at the post-office, for Mr. Graham wished to learn if there was any further news of Yellow Gid. There was none.

"That fellow must be squelched," remarked Graham, as they drove on. "It is too late in the history of our town to have a road-agent lord it over us. I fancy he will get the same usage his father had, when he's caught."

"Would you approve of that?" asked Allen, in a low voice.

"Decidedly not. I am not of that build. Still, you must remember where we live, the temper of the men, and the record of the past."

"As for me, I consider lynching the most barbarous act of the century!" declared Allen, warmly. "Let a man be ever so guilty, he is entitled to trial by law, and those who take his life without giving him such a trial are more deeply dyed in evil and brutality than he can be!"

"Your sentiments do you honor," returned Mr. Graham, sincerely, but rather carelessly. "We are about to pass the scene of the robbery."

They did pass it, but Yellow Gid did not leap out to molest them, and no more was said about the holding up of the stage. It was a sore subject with Allen.

It was an all-day journey to the town where Bianca was to be found, and the sun had set when they reached the place. Allen wished it would stand still, if by that means their journey would be indefinitely prolonged. Nothing of the sort occurred, and in due time they reached the town.

Bianca had been put to live with an honest family, who, Allen well knew, would prove faithful to the trust, and to that place the travelers went at once.

News awaited them which both pained and pleased Allen, paradoxical as the statement might be under some circumstances. Bianca was ill; so ill that, though in no danger, she was in bed.

"And she won't be able to go on a journey for some days," added the mistress of the house.

Horace Graham looked grave, but Allen saw the way of danger blocked for a while. If she could not go to Climax Claim, there was no perceptible reason why the dreaded revelation should come at once.

She was able to receive them, and they went in without delay. It was an eventful occasion, for then the elder Graham was to get his first impressions of his son's selected wife, and, deny it as one will, first impressions go a long way.

No one could complain of the way in which Horace began, and with Bianca and Allen both on their guard, affairs started off well.

Mr. Graham noted the beauty, the refinement, the almost appealing look of the girl, and his heart really went out to her. Well, indeed, was the interview begun, and well was it carried on.

An hour later, when the visitors were alone in their room, the father gave the son his hand and warmly said:

"My boy, you'd do famously in business if you acted as well as in selecting a wife. I approve of your choice to the letter, as far as I have seen. An excellent girl, I do believe."

Allen shook his father's hand and he was duly happy, but the next words were not so pleasant.

"I think you said she was of good family?"

Allen tried to hide his embarrassment. "As I know none of them I can't say with the positiveness I could under other circumstances, but I think her own nature speaks well for others."

"So it does, Allen; so it does. But is there any hope that we can take her home with us?"

"I'm afraid not. I am very reluctant to put her to any risk."

"Perfectly right, but I am in hopes she will be much better in the morning."

Allen did not join in the declaration, and though it seemed cruel, he felt no great desire to see her recover so speedily.

His love affair was on a tangled basis.

CHAPTER XIX.

YELLOW GID'S NIGHT VISIT.

Another day had been spent at Climax Claim in trying to find the bold road-agent, but without success. From the time when he spurred his gallant horse and rode away from the scene of the robbery, the robber appeared to have vanished and left no sign.

So the hunters came home tired and weary, and with the firm belief that they had better wait until Yellow Gid, if the troublesome person really was he, broke loose again.

One man did not share in that opinion. David Morrell went home, sore at heart and ugly, troubled in many ways, and wondering how he was going to meet the various storms which were rising around him.

He sat down in his room and meditated. He thought of Lasco Girdwood.

When the latter came to Climax Claim and set up business in the same line as David, the latter had sneered at his efforts to rival him. In time he found he had misjudged his man. After a few months Girdwood had more than a half of the business.

Now Morrell wished he had not been so hasty, and—strange fact for one so hot-headed—he was actually considering whether Girdwood would loan him money if he went to his rival.

Man, driven to the wall, sometimes puts his pride away.

This night Morrell sat up until twelve o'clock. Then he went to bed weary and disconsolate—to fall asleep, and then—to start up with a nervous feeling that all was not well. He was right.

A light was burning in the room, and a man was there.

A tall man, finely clad in a suit of peculiar make, but not recognizable on account of the fact that he had a veil drooping from his fancy hat. This person stood within a few feet of the bed, looking steadily at Morrell, and as the banker half sprang up he revealed a revolver and covered him with a quick, graceful motion.

"Sit there!" he ordered, calmly. "Your life depends upon your keeping quiet!" added the intruder, impressively.

"Who in thunder are you?" demanded the banker.

"Your enemy!"

"Show your face, if you are not a coward!"

"Let my work answer for me."

The wind sifted in through the window and blew the veil a little aside. It revealed the fact that the unknown had hair of golden hue, and the contrast was so great to the black of his attire that it could not escape notice.

To David Morrell it came with the force of a blow.

"Yellow Gid!" he gasped.

"You say so. If you believe it you must be aware that you see here your most deadly foe—the man you have so hideously wronged!"

"What do you mean by comin' inter my room in this way?" demanded Morrell, blusteringly.

"I am Gideon Gath!"

"Ah, you own up, do ye? Wal, by thunder! you're a reckless cuss!"

"I am here," went on the night visitor, impressively, "to give you some idea of what you have to expect in the future. I took from the custody of the stage-driver a trifle of money belonging to you—something like twenty thousand dollars—I forget the exact sum. This was only an earnest of what I am going to do. Before I finish with you I shall beggar you financially. Even that will be but the beginning of my vengeance!"

"What more do ye want?"

In a hard voice came the reply:

"Do you remember how my kindred

died? Do you remember the fate of Harmer Gath?"

Morrell moved uneasily. He wanted to avoid facing the facts, but did not see how it was to be.

"I remember," he admitted, after a pause.

"Find your answer there!"

"I couldn't help that affair."

"Oh! couldn't you? Who urged the lynchings on? Who gave them a reward to do the murder? Who fed their passions when they would have cooled? You and you alone—monstrous as the act was. On your head, Dave Morrell, is my poor father's blood."

"And your crime," pursued Gideon, "deserves no name except that of deliberate, cold-blooded murder; it deserves no punishment except that accorded to murder, and it will get precisely the punishment due it!"

"Do you threaten me?" demanded David.

"I do! Still further, what I threaten I shall do."

The banker wiped the sweat of fear away from his brow, and was speechless for the moment.

The terrible intruder spoke further:

"A new order of things has begun at Climax Claim. From this time on, I, the avenger, am to be counted in the daily life of those who live here. I defy you to catch me until I see fit to end my labor of vengeance. Before then you will have cause to repent most bitterly that you ever engaged in any undertaking, good or bad, near Climax Claim. Beggarred, harassed, hunted and broken in spirit, you will be ready to welcome death!"

Once more the strong temper of the banker flamed up in defiance of the revolver.

"By thunder! I shall have somethin' ter say about all this!" he declared, and on the instant he determined to end matters then and there by overcoming his visitor, if it could be done.

He flung the pillow aside, grasped the revolver beneath it and turned to use it, but there was a single swift, deft blow, and the gun went flying away, leaving him again disarmed and helpless, while Yellow Gid coolly exclaimed:

"You lose, as usual! Why do you fight against fate? I am your master, and your master I will remain!"

Morrell knew it at last. He was helpless; the Vandal was, indeed, his master!

"We will part for now," Yellow Gid added. "I go, but you shall hear from me again, and when you the least desire it!"

Backing toward the window, he picked up the revolver on the way; then he sprang nimbly out on the piazza. From there his retreat was quick and safe.

CHAPTER XX.

A HUMBLING DESPOT.

The following morning Morrell went to his office and devoted considerable time to the study of certain figures. Then he called to his partner, and Levere came like the awkward schoolboy he practically was in the affairs of the firm.

"Have you been in the habit of observing Lasco Girdwood?" Morrell spoke abruptly.

"Yes," Levere replied.

"What do you think of his feeling toward us? You've seen him when I ain't. Do you think he has got a deep grudge against us or not?"

"He always looks pleasant enough when I see him," the junior partner replied.

Morrell looked across the way to where Lasco Girdwood's sign swung lazily in the breeze.

"Would he loan us money?" muttered the banker. "He can, an' never miss it. But will he? Or will he hold spite? I'm on the breakers an' must miss no chance. I need that money bad, an' Lasco Girdwood is the only one who can give it to me. I'll beard him in his den. I'm goin' ter call on him and ask him to loan us cash enough ter make up fer what I lost by the stage robbery."

The words and the tone of the banker

so dazed the weak-minded junior that he could only stare in amazement.

Morrell was silent for a time; then he abruptly arose, and putting on his hat he went out, crossed the street and entered the office of his rival.

How much it cost him in the way of humiliation only he could tell.

Lasco Girdwood was there and doing business with a crowd of men. Business never seemed to flag at his place. He did not look up as David appeared, so the latter had a chance to wait and watch.

Easily and well he disposed of his other callers. As good luck would have it nobody came in after Morrell, and when the way was finally cleared, and David failed to step forward, Girdwood looked up inquiringly.

He saw his rival, pale and uneasy.

"Good-morning, Mr. Morrell. A warm morning, sir!" he encouragingly greeted.

"Yes, it is," agreed David, awkwardly, stepping forward. "Can I see you in your private office?"

"Certainly!" and he arose and led the way to the other room.

"You've heard of my loss by the stage robbery?" David began abruptly, as the door closed.

"Yes, it is common talk."

"That affair hit me hard," confessed Morrell. "I relied upon that money to relieve certain temporary embarrassments. You know how the money went, an' maybe you kin see what it meant to a man hard pressed."

"Why, yes; I see. But why don't you get a loan to tide you over?" asked his rival, as if in some surprise.

"It would be hard fer me ter raise twenty thousand dollars, because—"

Morrell hesitated, but finally answered:

"Because I've been raisin' that way fer some time, already, an' I'm about at the end o' my rope."

"Indeed? I don't see how you got in this way," replied Girdwood, with more show of interest. "Business has been good with me."

"I know it!" bitterly retorted Morrell, and then made the dreaded plunge.

"You say you are prosperous," he added, abruptly. "Wal, what are you willin' ter do fer a man when he's down?" he asked.

Girdwood's face betrayed no emotion. "Can I really be of assistance to you?" he asked.

"Can you? Wal, I should say so, ef you will loan me the twenty thousand dollars."

"That's a pretty stiff loan."

"I'll give the best of security," urged Morrell, growing more eager and hopeful.

"And do business in opposition to me on my money!" and for the first time Girdwood smiled.

"Surely," assumed David, "if you have the cash to loan there must be some way in which we can arrange matters so as to be mutually satisfactory."

"I can think of but one way."

"What is that?" was the quick inquiry.

"By giving me an interest in your business!"

CHAPTER XXI.

RECOGNIZED.

Morrell, wholly unprepared for such a suggestion, could but make answer:

"I ain't sure I understand."

"I am not averse to loaning you what you need," explained Girdwood, "but this loaning with, or without, security, I do not like. I owe nobody money; I do not care to have any one owe me. Debts make trouble, worry and other things. Hence, the only way I can help you is to take an interest in your business and let you have the cash under such circumstances."

Morrell meditated.

He had never anticipated any such proposal. In all his study to find a way out of his financial dilemma he had not once dreamed of Girdwood as a partner.

Did this offer hide a snare?

He studied the face before him closely. A firm, strong, self-reliant face—that of one who looked the ability which Girdwood had shown since he came to Climax Claim. At that moment it seemed to Mor-

rell that he had seen some face like it in the past, but it might have been only the fact that he had grown accustomed to the looks of his rival, since they were of the same town.

"Can you command the money at once?" the visitor asked, "and put it into the business?"

"Yes, certainly, if I so decide."

"And you'll do it under the circumstances mentioned?"

"Of course I shall have to look into your standing a trifle, but I doubt not I shall find that all right."

The project, now under way, went swimmingly after that. Mr. Morrell warmed to the subject, and, under the inspiration of having a chance to get the desired help, warmed to Girdwood, too. With such a partner he might be able to retrieve all his losses, and once more put his business on a solid basis.

When they came to the terms of the partnership it was just as easy, for Girdwood did not ask for anything unreasonable, and it was his suggestion that all be made as simple as possible.

The bargain was not closed then, but when David went away he did so feeling that all danger of bankruptcy was over. He had been saved by the man he had tried so hard to ruin—if he was saved!

Levere, who had been waiting with much curiosity and interest, began with questions, but was curtly squelched. At that moment he seemed especially weak and worthless to the practical banker.

Going to the inner office he locked the door and sat down to think the new deal over.

The following day Lasco Girdwood sat in his office. There was no business just then, and he was looking over papers which he held. There was a rustle of garments at the door, and he turned to behold a lady caller. He arose with celerity, and bowed deeply. His strong face remained impassive.

"Miss Chester, I think?" he politely inquired.

"My name is Helen Chester," was the ready reply.

"I remember seeing you in the town. You are welcome to my office. Can I aid you in any way?"

He had set a chair for her, and made her welcome with the little attentions which go further than words.

The visitor seemed embarrassed, and the color mounted to her cheek.

"You are a man of business," she replied, smiling faintly, "and of such things I know nothing. I have not come to buy or sell. I have come—"

She paused and again evinced embarrassment.

Lasco Girdwood made a reassuring gesture, and his manner was full of respect and dignity.

"I hear," she abruptly added, "that you are about to buy a share in the business of David Morrell."

"Has the news traveled so fast?"

"It is all over town, but that is not to the point. If you take that step you are ruined."

Suddenly she made the announcement, while Girdwood regarded her in surprise.

"Upon what do you base the prophecy?" he asked.

"Dare you risk daily intimacy with Morrell?"

As she asked the question she leaned forward and fixed an intense gaze upon him. He moved in his chair, and there was a suggestion of nervousness in the act.

"Why should I not?" he inquired.

"Mr. Girdwood, I am reluctant to seem to meddle with your affairs, and I hope my course will not be misconstrued, but I beg leave to say, I know you!"

His large eyes did not waver; his face did not change.

"Rather an obscure statement," he easily returned. "May I ask what it means?"

"Simply that you are Gideon Gath!"

With a quick glance around, and then with much lowered voice, she made the assertion. It was simply made, too; no trace of feeling was in the utterance. Lasco Girdwood did not smile or look

alarmed, but with unchanged face he kept his gaze on her.

"Gideon Gath," he answered, calmly, "is a man reputed to be a road-agent and robber. Do you really mean to say I am he?"

"Six months ago I came to you, when you were Asher Bradstreet, and made known the fact that I knew you, then. Was it done for your good or harm?"

"Do I look like that Asher Bradstreet?"

"You do not. The resemblance is so faint that no one else has noticed it, and to me it is so almost imperceptible that I am amazed at your skill in disguising yourself. Nevertheless, I know you. I recognized you when you first appeared here as Lasco Girdwood. I was amazed then at your recklessness. Let that rest, however, for your device has succeeded well enough for your purpose; nobody knows your secret but me, and I think my past record is answer for the natural inquiry if your secret is safe with me."

Girdwood leaned forward and took her hand impulsively, his cold composure suddenly giving way.

"Miss Chester!" he exclaimed, "I owe more to you than to any other living person. You gave me, as Asher Bradstreet, warning of the projected expedition against my father, six months ago. It was not your fault, but that of fate, that I failed to save him. This time, as then, you recognized me, but I am again safe from betrayal through your kindness. How can I ever thank you?"

The color mounted slightly to her face.

"No thanks are necessary."

"I have met you in the street since I came here last," he went on, "and have often wondered if by any chance you might again recognize me, but I did not think it possible when it was the belief of all that I had perished on the mountain."

"How did you escape?" Helen asked.

Girdwood's face grew dark.

"I fell by the chasm," he explained, "wounded, and, I thought, dying. Consciousness yet remained, however, and I used the instinct of self-preservation which even an animal has. If I could not save my life I wanted to die where their profane hands could not touch me, or their hatred make my last moments bitter."

"I could not walk, and that it was that which saved my life, I doubt not. Reduced to the last extremity, as I thought, I began to crawl away. I had gone but a short distance when they were at hand. I saw them as they arrived at the chasm and decided I had fallen down it. Had they acted wisely they would have had me then, but they were slow to take any other step, and I improved the opportunity."

"Inch by inch I crawled on my weary, painful path, expecting the final moment to come with each movement of my bleeding body."

"It was not my lot to die thus, and I at length reached a secure nook. There, to be brief, I lay until the foe was gone."

"A long period of illness from my wounds followed. Three weeks I lay in the cave to which I crawled, but at last I got the better of my hurts and was able to go out into the world!"

He ceased, and Helen added, in a low voice:

"To seek revenge."

"Revenge! Yes, a son's revenge—revenge for my own wrongs and atrocious persecution! Do you blame me?"

"Let my silence answer!"

"It does answer, and nobly! There are in your nature depths of nobility one can always find new and interesting. Miss Chester, I thank you again, and most warmly. I must go on, in my work; I cannot halt or waver. It is my destiny now to defeat, dishonor, ruin the base-hearted wretch who really has been the sole author of my misery and disgrace! And his voice quivered with his deep emotion."

"I will not bid you turn back, for it is your affair in the full sense of the word, but I warn you against this combination with David Morrell."

"Why?"

"Incredible as it seems that he has not recognized you as Asher Bradstreet, there is one who will detect your identity if you get too intimate at his house. I have lost faith in the sagacity of man," added Helen, smiling faintly, "but beware of the eyes of woman! If you go to Morrell's house, and you certainly will under the new state of affairs, beware of the gaze of Rosamond Morrell!"

"Does she suspect me?"

"Not to my knowledge, but do you think she would forget the man who made love to her in the past? If you do, you do not know or understand women!"

CHAPTER XXII. A NEW SCHEME.

The next morning Girdwood was in the office of David Morrell. He had been made very welcome. His new partner's feelings toward him were mixed. David could not get over the hatred he had felt for the person who had out-generated him in business, but the new impetus given the affairs of the firm was not to be disregarded, and Morrell was in high spirits in spite of all.

The money received from Girdwood had already done good execution, and the future seemed bright.

The two men were discussing certain investments when some one strolled into the office. Girdwood looked at him with indifference, but David changed expression noticeably.

The new-comer was Gad Jackling.

The person of the sneer took a chair without being asked.

"Gentlemen," he composedly remarked, "I have wealth to invest—not a fabulous amount, but just simply an every-day layout. Since coming to Climax Claim I have been looking for the best chance to get it into service, and I am prepared to believe it is with your house."

"Mr. Morrell will attend to you, sir," was Girdwood's reply.

David started. He did not want any more dealings with Gad Jackling, but was not in position to refuse. He had not forgotten the experience at his house with the man.

"Real estate is my hobby," added Gad.

"There's plenty of it here," indifferently observed Girdwood.

"I'm a plain person," went on the caller. "My life has been one of hardship and peril. I've seen much and learned more. Here is one of the badges of my experience and knowledge."

He drew a coiled rope from under his coat, and with a skillful cast sent it whirling through the air. It fell where it showed to good advantage, but one end was on David Morrell's lap, and that gentleman hurriedly flung off the coil, bringing a sneer to Gad's face.

"Only a rope," he commented.

"Keep the thing away!" requested David, nervously.

"It won't bite you. Only a rope, yet it has a history. This identical lariat has strangled a man!"

He gave it another flit, and it turned under his skillful management and writhed across the floor as if alive.

Morrell watched in dogged silence, wondering if the visitor was a common man or a demon. Jackling had ways which made almost anything possible from him.

"The rope which strangled a man!" he reiterated, fixing his gaze more keenly upon Morrell.

Girdwood did not appear to find this conduct of interest.

"We are ready to meet you on business," he suggested, impatiently. "Proceed to it at once, if you please."

"Very well. My plan is this: I wish to secure land here to erect and maintain a place for the incineration of the dead, the same place to be called the Stephen Darrow Vaults!"

David breathed hard. The name Stephen Darrow was the same he had heard when Jackling first produced the rope at the Morrell house.

It had a meaning to him then; it had more now, for he began to fear the speaker was going to betray the secret of the past.

"Ridiculous!" Girdwood exclaimed. "What in the name of commonsense do we want with a place of incineration here? The earth is a spot good enough for our dead."

"I do not ask for money aid, sir. All I require is land upon which to build the Stephen Darrow Vaults."

Girdwood turned irritably to Morrell.

"I leave you to deal with this crank," he bluntly added.

"He and I shall get along famously," declared Gad, with his meaning smile.

"I trust that Mr. Morrell will look upon the project in a different manner, and see the value of it," the caller complacently returned, and immediately proceeded to business. The idea was discussed, and David endeavored to show Mr. Jackling that, though the East might see fit to burn instead of bury their dead, there was no crying need of such an institution at Climax Claim.

Jackling acted with apparent deliberation, and at last seemed so far convinced that he decided to defer action until he had thought it over further.

He went out without any more of his weird acts or words, and Morrell breathed freer.

"Boot argument is needed on that fellow!" remarked Girdwood, tersely. "Such men are unmitigated nuisances."

"They may be dangerous."

The younger man smiled.

"If this person gets that way let me know. I've seen a good many just such cranks and know what they are. They go along all right as long as they can bluff a man, but wilt like a rag when brought face to face with determination. I could squelch your incinerator without the least trouble!" and Girdwood turned to his work.

Morrell sat in a dazed state. For the first time since Jackling began to annoy him it occurred to him as possible that the latter might be "squelched." He looked at Lasco Girdwood. He noted his muscular form and resolute air. Certainly, he was far superior to Jackling in all ways.

Had he found a partner, only, or a rescuer?

But little more work did David Morrell do that forenoon. He sat and thought deeply, and then walked home in the same mood. He had an idea, and was so reluctant to let it rest that he took pains to put it in motion as soon as possible. He told his daughter he wished to see her alone, and they were soon satisfactorily situated.

"Rosamond," he began, abruptly, "hev' you any fancy fer Louis Levere?"

"Why, I'm to marry him," the daughter replied, in surprise.

"That ain't what I asked. Thar' is a thing they call love. Be you a victim to it?"

"Louis Levere is a count!" significantly answered Rosamond.

"Thar's somethin' better than a title—money. Would you throw a titled beggar over for a rich man? In brief, would you give Levere the dump an' marry Lasco Girdwood?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

GIRDWOOD AND MATRIMONY.

Some young women would have been shocked at the question, but Miss Rosamond was not. She regarded her father inquiringly.

"Are you dreaming?" she asked.

"If I am, it's the most matter-of-fact dream you ever heard of," the father replied. "Yes, an' thar's solid chunks o' wisdom in it, too. What does Louis Levere amount to?"

"He's a count, and the woman who marries him will be a countess."

"What will she live on?"

"Her father's money," answered Rosamond, with calm assurance.

"Suppose it should give out?"

"No fear of that, I think. But what are you driving at?"

The gravity of Morrell's manner had at last made itself felt upon the girl, and she grew more grave, herself.

"Do you know I lost a big pile o' money by the stage robbery?"

"It would be to some. Surely, though, it has not embarrassed you?"

"Rosie, sence Girdwood come ter town thar' has been a change in things. Before that I had all the trade to myself, an' did famously. The minute he began thar' was a change. The cunnin' o' that man is simply amazin'! I used ter think Asher Bradstreet was a wonder, but Girdwood beats him out o' sight. He is a phenomenon! How he gets all his business work in I don't know, but he does. Yes, an' from the first he has cut into my profits ter the quick. He took my trade, an' when I made efforts ter beat him out by bold strokes he wa'n't any the worse off, but I was. In the rivalry I lost heavy."

The girl noted her father's downcast manner and hurriedly asked:

"Surely, you didn't get hit hard?"

"But I did! You asked me why I took Girdwood inter my firm. Gal, it was simply because bankruptcy stared me in the face."

"Why didn't you shoot the villain?" intemperately demanded Rosamond.

"Shoot him? Why, I never heard o' him doin' any underhand work, an' I feel grateful that he come ter my rescue as he did. It was he who saved me, not did me harm. Gal, he is a long-headed man, Girdwood is; an' his money pulled me out o' the hole wonderful. Money? Why, he has it by the bushel, an' he will make a rich man o' me once more, by thunder!"

"This don't make Louis Levere any the less one of the nobility," she remarked, slowly.

"Which is the best, money or an empty title?"

"Why not have both?"

"With Girdwood in, Levere is a mere drag on us; he was always that an' no more on me; an' now I suspect he will get the bounce before long. Girdwood ain't likely ter want a stupid feller around."

"You are plain enough, but suppose Girdwood don't want me?"

"Now you come ter business!" declared Morrell, seeing the gradual yielding of the fortress. "The other day when you was passin' I see him look at you in a peculiar way. It impressed me as odd at the time, an' though I wa'n't sure o' my ground, then, I'll bet the drinks he is in love with you!"

Rosamond did not let that possibility worry her. She looked very much gratified.

"Mr. Girdwood is fine-appearing," was her modest comment.

"He is, sure; I don't know no finer; an' he's a smart man, too. That's what counts, gal; it's the man who can make money who is of use in the world. I've been poor—"

"I haven't, and don't want to be!" declared Rosamond. "Give me a rich man and a money-maker, every time. Are you sure your fortunes are so desperate?" she added.

"I've give it to you straight."

"Then let us tempt Girdwood. If I find I can snare him, and he continues to bring cash into your pocket, I'll throw Levere over with a will. Mrs. Lasco Girdwood. What sound could be sweeter!"

Rosamond laughed lightly as she spoke, but it was clear that her cold nature had undergone no change.

When Rosamond lost her wedding finery at the hands of Yellow Gid she had declared the marriage off for the time being until she could recover her nerve, if not her garments. To this Levere had taken exceptions in vain, but had been appeased with the promise that the delay should be but brief. Now it occurred to David that it might not be easy to manage the count.

He was a member of the banking firm, and had, at least, that hold upon them.

If he could do them no damage, he might, at least, make matters serious by giving publicity to the affair, and thus letting Girdwood know the character of the woman who aspired to marry him.

Morrell mentioned his fear.

"Leave that to me," advised Rosamond. "I can manage the count. Let me deal with him, and you shall see I am no mean diplomat."

So it was settled.

The next day Morrell and his daughter went to ride. The accumulation of troubles and close application to work had worn upon the banker, and he felt the need of relaxation. The help received from Girdwood had done much to cheer him up, and with a trifle of pleasure in the days to come he thought he would soon have his health back.

With the driver on the box, the carriage rolled away on the trail, and father and daughter leaned back in their places and looked as contented as rich people should.

There were no regular roads in the section, but many of the gulches had smooth and hard bottoms where a carriage could be driven with ease and comfort, so David ordered his man to turn from the stage-road, and they were soon rolling along the unfrequented way.

The day was fine and air cool and invigorating. The banker forgot his troubles and was happy. For some hours they wound around in the gulches, and then turned toward home.

"I am getting to know this region well," remarked Rosamond. "I believe if I were one of the searchers I could find Gideon Gath!"

"Thunder! don't speak o' him!" Morrell exclaimed.

"I'm not sure I'm afraid of him."

"Well, you didn't seem to enjoy your other meetin' with him!" curtly retorted Morrell.

"Why should I, when he took all my valuables away? But I think he will be careful to keep out of sight, now."

The banker hoped so, but—

As they rounded a curve in the path, the horses suddenly pulled up and stood recoiling on the carriage.

In front of the team was a horseman, and one who made the trio gaze in silent surprise and dismay.

"Yeller Gid!"

Yellow Gid it might be. Handsomely dressed, athletic of form, and masked, he looked the road-agent to the life!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE VANDAL'S SECOND STROKE.

The Vandal waved his hand commandingly.

"Driver, keep where you are, and don't raise your eyes from your work. The rest of you dismount!"

"Dismount?" echoed David. "What for?"

"You will learn later. Get out of the carriage!" and Yellow Gid carelessly swung a revolver around to the front.

David Morrell was in a panic.

"If you want our money," he began, huskily, "we can give it to you right where we sit."

"I don't want your money! Are you going to obey?" demanded Yellow Gid, sharply.

They were. Neither of them was in a mood to do otherwise, and David led the way. He alighted, and Rosamond tremblingly followed. Then the robber waved his hand to the driver.

"Move on!" he directed, "but halt just near enough so I can see you. If you go further until I give the word I shall be compelled to shoot you. Do you hear?" and the revolver was raised a little higher. The man looked doubtfully at his master, but David made no sign and the driver touched the horses and started on, as ordered. As he passed the road-agent he spoke something in a low voice to the driver.

"Now," abruptly remarked the Vandal, turning to his prisoners, "I think we can soon settle our business. You have been hunting for me for some time. You have found me."

"Thunder! I didn't want to find you this way!" exclaimed Morrell.

Rosamond burst into tears.

"For Heaven's sake, don't harm me!" she implored.

The Vandal ignored the woman's speech and quietly went on:

"I owe you thanks for having come to Dark Divide. By so doing you saved me a good deal of trouble, for I had been wanting to see you."

"What do you want now?" almost groaned Morrell.

"Revenge!"

"You wouldn't kill us?"

"How did you deal with Harmer Gath?"

"That was done in passion. I've repented of it many a time—"

"Your repentance comes too late!"

"But I am willin' ter make amends—"

"It is not in your power. Had you never done that deed all would have been well with you, but you did it without mercy. Do you think mercy will be shown you, now? If you do, you are wholly in error. As you sowed, so shall you reap. You sowed in death; you shall reap of death!" and he dismounted from his horse.

Yellow Gid's voice was inexorable, and both of his hearers were in a panic. Morrell stood silent before his terrible accuser.

"You do well," Gideon went on. "There is no defense you can make; you may as well bare your head to the storm and accept the inevitable."

The speaker pointed toward where the carriage had last been seen.

"You are deserted!" he added.

Vehicle and driver had disappeared.

"By my orders he has gone on to Climax Claim. He cannot help you. You are alone with me."

Rosamond had been weeping silently, but now the remorselessness of the Vandal's tone made her sob convulsively.

She flung herself at his feet.

"Spare me! spare me!" she wailed.

He struck away the hand she raised in entreaty.

"The Morrells shall taste the same mercy they have shown!" he pronounced, in an icy voice.

She tried to clasp his knees, but he recoiled.

"This is my hour of vengeance!" he went on, in tones which seemed to chill the hearers. "I am deaf to all words of pleading. You want to know my plan of satisfaction. You shall be informed!"

The Vandal extended his arm and pointed in the direction the carriage had vanished, and looked at Morrell.

"Go!" he commanded.

"Eh?" muttered David, stupidly.

"Go, you!" he reiterated, sharply, and he brought the revolver to bear on the banker's head.

"Oh, for God's sake, don't leave me here with this terrible man, father! Don't go!" pleaded the girl, in keenest fear and anguish.

"Will you go?" shouted Yellow Gid.

David Morrell marched off without a word. There was a cry of absolute horror from Rosamond, and she tried to follow, but the strong hand of the Vandal held her back.

"You are to stay!" he icily remarked.

Morrell did not pause or even look backward, but increasing his pace, he was soon at the point of the cliff.

Yellow Gid drew Rosamond toward his horse.

"What are you going to do?" she faltered.

"Take you with me!"

"Oh, spare me; spare me! What have I ever done to you? Why should you make me suffer for another's act? I never harmed you—"

"You talk in vain!"

Still holding her firmly, the Vandal swung himself into the saddle, holding her securely before him. Then he turned the head of the horse toward the north—the most desolate part of the range—and gave him the word. The animal sprang away with spirit. For a moment his feet beat upon the hard soil; then he dashed out of sight of any one who might be watching.

Away, away, and up the Divide they went, until the hills shut them in fully, and she was truly alone with the outcast.

CHAPTER XXV.

MEN OF MYSTERY.

On the same afternoon a carriage drove up in front of Horace Graham's door. The professor hurried out to meet it, and from the interior came Allen and Bianca Gath, or, as the elder man knew her, and as she

had been called ever since she began the new life, Alice Mayton.

She was looking somewhat pale, and was not yet fully recovered from her illness, but had now come to Climax Claim according to the plan arranged.

It was a momentous occasion when she entered the house, Bianca having strongly objected to going to the house in any but a frank and open manner, but was overruled by her lover.

The step then taken was for weal or woe, to her, and it remained to be seen how Alice Mayton would get along in her new role.

All went well at first; there were no prying eyes to notice the girl's golden hair or make questioning comments as to her identity.

Later on that day Allen had a visitor. It was Peter Potts, whose frequent association with Allen had caused the latter's father considerable surprise, but the younger man never neglected any chance to see his ally. He did not neglect it now.

Peter asked him to walk outside, and they went accordingly.

"Have you any news?" Allen demanded, quickly.

"Not an atom, I confess. No wonder the hunters don't find Yeller Gid. 'Thar' ain't a fly on me bigger nor an elephant, but I can't find the critter."

"That's bad!"

"Don't be downcast; we'll find him yet. I've found caves an' dens galore, whar' men or women hev' lived, an' 'thar' ain't no shadder o' doubt that Harmer Gath flourished 'thar' once. I'm right inter the bowels o' the mystery, an' I must root Gid Gath up sooner or later."

"And the notices?"

"I've put them up as you ordered. Ef Gid ain't blind he must find one o' them soon. When he does, what then? The notices set forth that ef he wants ter hear something o' value ter him, right from the throat-latch of a friend, he must do so an' so. The question is, will he believe the notices come from a friend?"

Allen shook his head.

"Do you suppose he puts in all his time hiding in the hills of Dark Divide?" the young man queried.

"Whar' else should he be?"

"He is bold and daring. Suppose he does not remain there all the time? It would be true Gath recklessness for him to come right to this town o' nights. Perhaps he is far nearer to us than to the notices you have put up in the caves and dens."

"Jes' ez likely ez not."

The friends separated soon, and Allen returned to the house. Peter went back to the hotel in which he had made his home since coming to town the last time, and was prepared to take life easy after a hard day's labor, but he had a surprise.

Arriving at the hotel, he found people talking with animation, and when he had learned the cause he was equally interested.

Yellow Gid had been seen again, and Rosamond Morrell had been abducted by him.

The ex-road-agent's sympathies were all with the new master of the art, but he was amazed and discouraged at the fresh outbreak. How could Gid be saved, if he was resolutely bent upon running his head into new trouble day by day?

The Morrell carriage had come home with the driver on the box and David was within, but Rosamond was not with them, and everybody was eager to tell of her bold abduction.

What had gone before was but a rush-light in comparison with the latest. If Yellow Gid had taken to stealing women there could be no safety until he was captured, and all had an interest in the speedy ending of the campaign.

Once more David was busy forming a rescue party, and Peter was among those who started out with him to find the bold Vandal.

Allen was occupied at the house, and did not hear of the affair until the alleged rescuers were well under way, and then it came too late for him to share in the chase, if he had wished.

He went out to walk to the post-office, and on the way he met a tall, cloak-wrapped man. Graham would have passed him without comment or especial notice, but the other stopped short.

"Excuse me, sir, but I have a bit of business with you."

Allen looked up and at once became interested.

"I think you know me," added the speaker.

"I ought to," promptly agreed Allen. "You are the person who rejoices in the name of Moloch."

"I am he."

"I suppose you have come to ask me about your box. I will say it is still safe. Nobody has access to it but myself, and I keep it secure, only looking at it often enough to make sure it has not been tampered with."

"You have my thanks. I never have doubted that you would do your best with it. I managed it so as to see you to-night in order that I might notify you in person that all is still well with the man whose secret is in the box, and to guard against the necessity of sending you word to that effect."

"I am duly notified. How is your friend whose secret I hold?" he asked.

"All is well with him," impressively answered Moloch.

"Are you able to say when the box will be opened?"

"Not at present."

"Shall I know what his secret is, when the trust is over?"

"I think you will."

"The box is a source of no small annoyance to me. You brought it to me under peculiar circumstances; the whole matter is peculiar. I do not know what secret I hold. It may be one which will some day react upon myself, and I shall be well pleased when I am finally rid of it."

"I am sorry you are so minded, but must ask you to keep it, since I took it to you as the one place to which I could go to be assured of its safety."

"Do you live in this town?" asked young Graham.

"It is not my home."

"Have I ever seen you here?"

"I repeat it is not my home. I have to come by stealth when I come at all."

"You are not frank, I fear. I am very much of the opinion that if I knew the truth you would be found to be an acquaintance. At times you vaguely remind me of some one I have known, though I cannot grasp the key to the riddle."

"Frankly, you waste time in trying; I am not one of your people. Further than that I have nothing to say."

"As you will. I'll not seek to penetrate your secret."

"I have your good at heart, as well as my own."

Allen was not sure of that, but the man of mystery departed and the custodian of the box watched the unknown until, moving toward the hills, he disappeared.

Going on to the post-office he found some of the citizens in council.

"That's only one thing ter do!" declared one of them. "Gid Gath has got ter be served as his father was served. This last stroke is too much fer anybody ter bear. When he gits ter stealin' our gals it is time ter call a halt. How's that, pilgrims?"

The "pilgrims" with one voice agreed with him.

"Hyar's Al Graham! I'll bet he's with us."

"We all object to such work," unwillingly replied Allen.

"Object! Wal, I should say we do! Why, any decent man would. It is jest vile an' no discount. Don't I wish I had Yeller Gid here! Why, I'd take him an' cut his backbone out!"

"Now is your chance!"

A quiet voice near the door pronounced the words. Quiet as the information was, all looked that way, and saw—

By the door stood a masked man, straight and stalwart, his arms folded across his broad breast.

They gazed, and a new impression came over them—a suspicion, not expressed, but

felt, that they did not feel so belligerent as but a moment before.

"Gid Gath is here!" added the masked man. "What do you want of him?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SECRET IS KNOWN.

If anything was wanted of Yellow Gid those present were slow to make the fact known. Satisfied that the Vandal really was before them, they gazed in mute wonder, not a man of them all having the presence of mind to say or do anything.

"Well," sarcastically demanded the Vandal, "what are you all waiting for? Have you no word for Gid Gath?"

The question broke the spell.

As one man the citizens rallied, and one of their number found voice to command:

"Don't let him escape! Cut off the way of retreat!"

A sarcastic laugh from the Vandal, as he whipped out a revolver.

"Gid Gath is here!" he added. "Who wants to take him?"

The citizens looked at each other. No one seemed inclined to act.

"I have voluntarily come to see my friends here," the outlaw went on. "I am told I am wanted, I say. Who is here to deal with me?"

"Men!" cried a grizzled miner. "Kin we stand this? I say No! At him; at him, an' don't let up until he's dead!"

The speaker made a bold rush, but the Vandal recoiled, and the door was slammed in the miner's face. He almost fell over by the recoil, and there was delay in getting it open. When they accomplished that they saw Yellow Gid on horseback, looking toward them in a calm and matter-of-fact way.

"I thank you for your hospitality!" he announced, clearly, "and if you will come to Dark Divide I shall be glad to reciprocate. I am always at home. Come and see me!"

He waved his hand and spoke to his horse, and in a moment more it was speeding away through the now deserted streets, while Gid Gath looked around and waved a defiant farewell to the men he had so defied already.

"Shoot him! shoot him!" was the cry.

A weak volley went whistling in pursuit. They might as well have shot at the unrisen moon.

Allen Graham did not fail to see that the chance had come to make an effort to see Yellow Gid, and he started at once in pursuit. It seemed a useless effort, however, and he had no heart in the work. A fleet-footed horse was not to be beaten on even terms, but there was a slight possibility that he might be able to head the Vandal off by taking a short cut which the horse could not be made to follow.

This plan he hastened to carry out.

He indulged in a wild scramble for twenty minutes and ran panting over the rough way, often half-falling as he encountered some obstruction to his feet, but finally arrived where he could see the Vandal if he saw him at all.

If any one else had taken the same course he had distanced them, and now he had all to himself.

Down the trail he looked, but nothing was to be seen. No rider, no pursuer was there; only the quiet cliffs appeared as they kept watch over the range.

There was nothing to do but to wait and watch, and this he proceeded to do. Minutes, however, passed, and there was no further sign.

"It is settled!" he exclaimed. "Yellow Gid has again proven his right to be called a man hard to catch, and he has outstripped all. I may as well go home and be done with it. By Jove! but it's tough to have had my eyes on him and not be able to warn him!"

Slowly the speaker retraced his steps. The latest developments had not increased his satisfaction. Each new step taken by Gid Gath showed more and more how reckless he was, and it seemed impossible that he could long escape capture.

That night Allen's rest was not of the best, and he arose feeling that he was not in condition to cope with emergencies. Perhaps, since fate is fickle and capricious,

that was just the reason why he was speedily called upon to face new and troublesome complications.

Bianca was silent and nervous at the table. Horace Graham inferred she was not feeling in her best health, and the guess went unchallenged, but Allen saw deeper. He knew something had gone wrong.

Presently the elder Graham left them alone, and Bianca hurriedly whispered:

"I want to see you where we can converse in private."

"Let us go out, then."

Allen was more than willing to get away from other ears, and the outer air seemed as private a place as any.

They went almost in silence until well beyond the town.

Suddenly she turned upon her companion.

"Allen," she exclaimed, "what is this new mystery of the town about a road-agent?"

She spoke with feverish intensity, and Allen knew the secret was one no longer. He had got to face the truth.

"What do you know about the matter?" he asked.

"They say that Gideon Gath is alive and on the trail. Oh! Tell me this is not true—tell me it is some impostor, for even if by some miracle he were alive, I could not believe that of him! Nay, I would not believe it if I could!"

"Who has told you this?"

"I overheard two men talking under my window this morning. They said Gid Gath, as they called him, was alive, and had not only robbed the stage, but had stolen Rosamond Morrell, the last deed having but just occurred. Oh! Allen, tell me this is not true!"

Bianca caught her lover's arm, and her tear-filled eyes met his in earnest entreaty.

He took her hands tenderly within his own.

"The men did not intend to say what was not so, and I don't know that they did. If they were wrong it was an error shared by more than one at Climax Claim—in fact, by the whole town. It is believed Gideon Gath is, indeed, alive, and acting the road-agent. It pains me to tell you this, but so it is."

"My brother—my brother a road-agent!"

"It is but too true, I fear."

"I cannot, will not, believe it!" Bianca exclaimed, her tears flowing freely.

"I wish I could think you right."

"But his principles were always of the highest."

"You can guess what drove him to it."

"Revenge he might take in some way, for he has much of our father's spirit, but to resort to theft—never, never!"

Allen was silent.

"Besides, did not every one say he died when our father did?"

"It was so thought, but this man announces himself as Gideon Gath, and those who were familiar with his appearance not only declare it is so, but they recognized him before he made the announcement."

"Gideon, a road-agent?"

"Bianca, my heart bleeds for you, but what can I say to console you? I would disbelieve it if I could, but the evidence seems too positive."

"He must be mad, mad! Why, he can only bring himself to capture and death. It must result in that way; as much as this vicinity is built up now no one can expect to escape."

"I have been trying to see him, myself, and try to use my influence to make him abandon the life he has taken to, but thus far my efforts have been unsuccessful. If it is hard for his enemies to learn where he is, it is not less so for his friends. Peter Potts is here, and has been endeavoring to locate him by going into the hills of Dark Divide and searching foot by foot, as I may say. He may yet succeed."

"I thank you for the news. As usual, you are thoughtful of my happiness."

"If we can see him, we may be able to induce him to give up his rash work—in fact, I am sure we can if you can meet him."

Bianca was silent for a while, evidently

beset with another idea. Then she exclaimed:

"You seek to keep people ignorant of my identity. Why did you bring me here at this time?"

"Frankly, I should have postponed the coming if I had been able, but arrangements were all made and my father was eager to see you."

She sighed.

"To see Alice Mayton, but not Bianca Gath."

"It was you, under your real or assumed name, as it might be."

"I feel guilty to have come here under false pretences. If your father had known all he would not have received me. We have abused his trust."

"I cannot agree with you in this. You judge naturally, but do my father an injustice. Had he never seen you he might have been prejudiced against you, but he is discerning enough to know a worthy person when he sees one. He would not now abandon you or his faith in you. I am sure."

"Let us not try him too far. Our engagement must be broken."

"Broken! Why?"

"Because I am a living lie, here; I pose as a woman worthy of his esteem when the world would pronounce otherwise."

"The world! What have we to do with that most unjust of critics?"

"It is the one that rules. Don't misjudge me, but it is best our engagement should be broken."

"I object most decidedly. There is no good reason for it."

"Is it not enough that I am the sister of a road-agent?—yes, and the daughter of a road-agent? The last we have talked of before, but the new matter cannot be beaten down. If my brother is the new Vandal my acquaintance will ruin you."

"Be that as it may, I refuse to give you up, or to end the engagement. We cannot! As we have started, so must we go on. What good would it do to break off the engagement? Would not the explanation be more difficult and awkward than to let it go? What should we say?—what could we say?"

"I could leave the house."

"And go where?"

"Back to my latest haven."

"Is not your place near your brother?"

Bianca's face flushed.

"You are right; my place is here! You and Peter Potts are trying to save Gideon. I will try, too; I will stay and do my part. I know not what that part will be, or what I can do, but the future may show me. I will stay! More than that, I will ask no more of you in regard to the engagement than this: You and I will know it is in abeyance, to be revived, if possible, in the future; to be broken permanently if I find I am going to be a burden and a disgrace upon you and your honored name. Not one jot less shall I love you, but the engagement must be off, now, for a time, at least."

And in this decision she did not waver.

CHAPTER XXVII.

YELLOW GID COMES TO TOWN.

Another day passed, and though due and zealous search was made for Rosamond Morrell, she was not found. It was lost labor for all who had gone, as the weary hunters agreed as they stood by the post-office and talked the matter over.

"Gid Gath has got her shut up in some den so close that nobody is ever likely to find her," one oracle declared. "He knows plenty o' sech places, an' he'll work it ter the queen's taste. When he got the gal it was jest what he hankered fer, an' he'll hang ter her like merlasses ter flies."

"I never knowed a criminal ter get stuck on a woman but it was the means of his ruin!" added another hunter. "You mark my word, Yeller Gid will lose prudence in the company o' that gal, an' jest put hisself inter our claws, yet! Oh! a woman is the death-blow ter anybody with a big scheme, be he honest or dishonest!"

"That's straight! Wal, we're likely ter see less o' him now, he'll be so bound up in her."

"He may git tired o' her."

"Not much! He kin come the gallant when he ain't got no other business on hand, an' et ain't likely he'll throw a good thing away."

"Yes, he'll jest everlastingly hang ter her."

There was a rattling of a horse's feet up the street.

"Some o' the boys are late in gettin' in," commented a lounging.

"Alf Huse, I reckon."

The citizens looked lazily to see who was riding. On came the horseman. At the first his speed had been considerable, but as he drew near it was increased. At a hard gallop he tore along until the watchers caught good sight of him.

"Don't look like Alf."

"What's he got in his arms?"

"Some kind of a bundle."

The wise men of Climax Claim had not yet grasped the whole truth, but they were willing to see more. They were not disappointed.

On dashed the rider until he was almost abreast of them.

"Why, it's a woman!"

The wondering exclamation came as they saw that the supposed package had shape not common to its kind, but no further view was granted from that point of observation.

The rider halted suddenly, sprang to the ground, and, on the grass, laid the burden he had borne. Then he leaped back into the saddle. But the late burden sprang up, stretched out her hands, and shrilly cried:

"Gid Gath! Gid Gath!"

Something like an electric shock ran through the hearers.

They recognized the voice, and, too late, the facts of the case.

The Vandal had been under their very eyes, and was making good his escape!

Again came the half-frantic utterance of the woman:

"I am Rosamond Morrell! Is there no one here to capture Gid Gath?"

There was a roar from the citizens. Bold men were in the company, and men who knew how to fight. More than that—they were bound to capture the Vandal in some way, and now he had so recklessly ventured into the town they had the chance they desired. There was but one drawback—and that a serious one. No horses were at hand.

Yet all started on foot, and the air became vocal with their shouts as they endeavored to arouse others who could see Gath in time to block his way and make the good work sure.

The town was awakened, but all in vain. Like a flash Gid Gath went through the street, and by the moment an organized effort could be made he was out of sight and hearing.

Once more he had defied them all and won the struggle.

While some took part in the vain hunt, others went to Rosamond's side. She was too nervous and excited to be capable of coherent action, and stood wringing her hands and trying to urge the men on to some decisive effort.

Afterward, she had no recollection of what she had done, and this it was that made her so impractical. The men had some trouble to quiet her down, and even when this was done she did not give them the degree of information they desired.

Seeing that the best way was to take her to her father's house, this was done at once.

Morrell was not at home, but he heard the latest news and soon put in an appearance. By that time Rosamond had recovered her wits somewhat, and her welcome was more warm than daughterly.

"I'd like to know," she exclaimed, "what kind of wooden men we have in Climax Claim. Where were you that you did not see Gid Gath and capture him? You should be ashamed!"

"Wal, Rosie, I'm sartainly sorry he got away—"

"What good does it do to be sorry?"

"None, mebbey."

David was meeker than he would have

been had he not been sure he would get a tongue-lashing for having left her in Yellow Gid's hands. He did get what he expected, but the sky cleared finally and they became more practical.

"How did you an' him happen ter be hyar in town?" the banker asked.

"He brought me back."

"Gid Gath did?"

"Yes."

"Willin'ly?"

"What else? I had nothing to do about it. He took me on horseback, brought me to the center of the village and there dumped me down and left me."

"Thunder!"

"I think the man must be crazy."

"He's too confounded sane for my taste. But this does look queer. Why should he steal you, and then bring you back?"

"It's all a mystery."

"How has he used you?"

"Nobody ever used me better. He kept me prisoner as long as he wished, but let me severely alone. In fact, he hardly spoke to me at all while I was with him."

"Wal, he must be crazy."

"He carried me to his cave, and I was almost dead with fright when we got there. I could hardly stand, but he neither added to my alarm nor tried to lessen it. He put me in a room by myself, where I could not get out, and there he kept me a part of the time. At other moments I had the run of the cave, but never was there a chance to get away."

"Whar' was the cave?"

"Up in Dark Divide."

"I know, but where? Could you lead the way to it?"

"Heavens, no! I haven't the least idea where it is."

"What was it like?"

"A vast room of rock. How large it was I can't say, but it had many passages and branches. I think even Yellow Gid did not know it all, or, at least, that he did not visit the various parts often. In one of the chambers I found something which would have interested him—if, as I think, he had not seen it."

Rosamond fumbled in the pocket of her dress and brought out a sheet of paper.

"Read!" she directed.

David found the paper covered with characters plain enough to read, but of a nature like no writing he ever had seen before. He perused the contents eagerly.

This was the paper:

"TO GID GATH!"

"If this meets the eye of Gideon Gath he is advised that he has a friend who wants to see him. More than that, it is to the best interests of Gideon Gath to see that friend at once. He will learn something not now known to him which will change the whole current of his life."

"Certain things of the past have never been known to Mr. Gath. Let him seek the explanation before it is too late. He can learn a secret which will overjoy him."

"On receipt of this let him go to the dead pine of Snicker's Gulch and leave a series of rocks there in the shape of a cross. Under the center of the cross, in the earth, let him bury one or more pine cones to the depth of an inch. If he puts in one, he agrees to meet the writer there in one day; if two, in two days, and so on. The writer will watch the spot so there will be no miscarriage of the plan."

"This is no trap, no Judas work, but the effort of a true friend, who has failed to find Mr. Gath in other ways—an effort to find him, and to reveal to him a secret of the most vital importance to the aforesaid Gideon Gath."

There was no signature to this paper.

David looked up wonderingly.

"Who wrote this?" he asked.

"Don't you know? Isn't it a trick to entrap Yellow Gid?"

"No; or, if it is, I never have heard of it."

"I thought as much. I believe he has some friend, just as the paper claims, who is trying to get word to him."

"Wal, why didn't Gid grapple onto the paper, then?"

"He overlooked it. As far as I know, he did not once go near the part of the

cave where the notice was posted, so he would have no cause to suspect it was there, if, as I think, it was put up when he was not at home. Let us face the evidence thus presented. Gid Gath has some friend in Climax Claim. Who is it?"

"Ef I knew I'd see his neck stretched afore the sun rises ag'in!" cried the banker, fiercely.

"Catch your man before you hang him!" retorted Rosamond, practically. "Talk is cheap; action goes a good deal further."

David regarded the notice with fresh curiosity. Was it, indeed, what Rosamond inferred, or only the work of a joker?—perhaps of the Vandal himself? While he was considering the point the girl's face suddenly lighted up.

"Why not call Lasco Girdwood into this consultation?" she demanded. "If we are to impress him, what better time than this? I will pose as a heroine, and I think we may be able to get to work on your partner—the man with the money-bags!"

"A good idea, Rosie; a right good idea!" Morrell exclaimed. "I'll go about it at once. I'll call on Girdwood, and bring him hyar. You get all ready."

David went his way, while Miss Morrell proceeded to put herself in condition for the event as a blooded horse is cared for on occasion. Now the danger was over she had recovered all of her assurance, and was prepared for any part from languid pretense of illness to flippant unconcern, but she decided that the mood most likely to impress calm Lasco Girdwood was one of cool heroism.

Thus, when Morrell brought the former rival, Rosamond was steady and resolute of manner.

"Mr. Girdwood, this is my daughter, Miss Morrell!" announced David, with dignity. "My dear, our new partner."

Girdwood began a formal bow, but it was not in keeping with Rosamond's mood. She hastened to take the great financier's hand.

"I am glad to see one of father's friends," she observed, "and if I am not now in just my usual frame of mind, I trust you will not take notice of it. I have been severely tried, sir."

"I have heard of your adventure," Girdwood replied in a low and, it seemed, sympathetic voice.

"I hope you won't laugh at me when I say I have been made very nervous?" and she smiled into his face.

"Not by any means!" declared Lasco. "It is highly creditable to you that you are as cool as you are. So you have encountered Gideon Gath? Pray, what sort of a monster is this notorious road-agent?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FROM WAR TO WOOLING.

Girdwood did not allow the least smile to cross his face as he asked the question, and Rosamond seriously replied:

"As far as looks go, he is of fine form—as large as you are, and muscularly built. Of course I do not know how he looks in the face, since he was masked all the while he was with me."

"Didn't you get one glance at his face?" Lasco anxiously inquired.

"No."

"That was unfortunate."

"Oh! we all know how he looks!" declared Morrell. "Why he wore a mask when with her I don't see. He wore none on the trail when he robbed the stage, and his face has been well known ever since he was a boy."

"Some freak of his," calmly ventured Girdwood. "Well, this Vandal must have misused you severely, I suppose."

"No, he did nothing of the sort. He was not gallant, and does not come under the head of a romantic man. He simply ignored me."

"And then brought you back. How do you account for the last fact?"

"I can't do it; I don't know why he brought me back."

"A strange affair!"

"My gal showed great courage!" declared David.

"I judge so."

"Thunder! yes; an' in an awful tryin' position."

"I dare say his course was taken only to emphasize the fact that he thought he could lord it over Climax Claim. He may learn his mistake, for every one is indignant because of the outrage. I think Miss Morrell must have a strong hold upon the affections of the citizens."

"Oh, Rosie is right popular!" averred Morrell. "Nobody is more so, I kin tell ye."

This high compliment would have been amusing had it not been given with an object. David was not in the habit of wasting much good will, let alone good words, upon a daughter who had been too much like himself to be dutiful, but the time had come when she must be recommended by some one, and he did not know of anybody else likely to do it.

How Girdwood was affected it was not possible to say; his strong face was as unreadable as ever.

Some further conversation took place before the Morrells, bound up in their little scheme, thought of the paper found by Rosamond at the cave. When they did think of it it was brought out.

Rosamond made its introduction dramatic.

"See what I found at Gid Gath's lair!" she exclaimed.

She put out the document, and Girdwood received it with more interest than he generally exhibited in passing events.

His eyes dilated a little when he saw it was addressed to Gid Gath.

"You found this—where?" he demanded.

"In the robber's cave."

"Read it, Mr. Girdwood!" urged Morrell, "an' see what you think of it. Seems mighty funny ter me."

Girdwood needed no urging, and his gaze went from line to line as he took in the whole. Yet in all the reading there was not the least sign of emotion, and even a suspicious person would have found nothing upon which to base opinions. His face was simply unreadable and fixed. When all had been gone over he half-folded the paper.

"What do you think of it?" David impatiently asked.

"Tell me just how you came by it," calmly requested Lasco.

Rosamond obeyed. At the end Girdwood smiled slightly.

"This is a hoax," he declared. "Who would communicate with Gideon Gath thus? What friend has he? As I understand it, all of his kindred are dead, and he has no friends left. Who would wish to see him? Beyond doubt it is a hoax."

Morrell looked disappointed.

"That's something up, I feel sart'in sure," he persisted. "You kin bet ye'r last dollar this is a straight deal. The devil himself may hev' his friends, an' it seems Gid Gath has. Somebody hyar is in good will with him. Now, why can't we use this somebody ter catch Gid?"

"How?"

"Put the paper back—ef we kin find the place—an' let Gid go ter the place o' meetin'. We all know whar' it is, o' course, an' we kin keep a watch thar', an' when he comes all we hev' ter do is ter gobble him. See?"

"Well planned, and it seems that it ought to work," agreed Girdwood.

"I'm glad you think so, by thunder! You're a man o' sense, an' I like sech men. I'll put that scheme inter effect. By the way, I jest remember I hev' a letter to write, an' ef you an' Rosie will talk, I'll run off the note an' then see ye further."

Morrell thought himself very shrewd, and certainly had made way for his daughter to talk alone with Girdwood. As no one objected, he went to the other side of the room and began the work.

As his pen moved he secretly watched the couple near him.

It was hardly the hour or the place for elaborate impressions to be made, but Rosamond came to business with zeal, and it must be confessed, with no small share of cunning. Nature had made her fairly attractive as far as external show went, and she had the craft of a woman of her degree.

She talked well, and really entertained Lasco Girdwood. How well he was entertained she did not know.

The banker gave them all the time he could spare, but the hour was getting so late that he finally had to bring his employment to a close.

He crossed the room to them, and the interview ended.

Girdwood went home, but with the understanding that he was to be seen early in the morning, and that he would, meanwhile, devote a share of his time to thinking on the subject, and try to get light not only on the situation as it was, but to see a way in which they could get at and beat Gideon Gath.

Morrell clucked his daughter under the arm.

"How now, Rosie?" he demanded.

"Say, I do believe it is in me to gobble Lasco Girdwood!" she exclaimed. "I think I made an impression!"

"You did, surely!"

"And he has a bushel of money!"

"Keep it up, Rosie; keep it up!"

Father and daughter laughed in unison, regarding the matter as a rare joke. Presently, however, Rosamond grew thoughtful.

"Girdwood reminds me of some one. Who can it be?"

"I don't know. He seems just like himself an' nobody else. Et strikes me thar' is nobody else o' the same pattern."

"Yet he does remind me of somebody I have known in the past. Who it is I can't guess, now. Neither," she thoughtfully added, "can I tell where the resemblance comes in. Is it in looks or manner? I really can't tell."

Meanwhile Girdwood had gone home, seeming as calm as ever, but once in his private room he sat down and fell into deep thought. Long and earnestly he debated on some point. Finally he exclaimed aloud:

"What can it mean? Is David Morrell shrewder than I have thought, and was there a trap concealed beneath the paper he showed me? I am sure there was not. Incredible as it seems, the girl must have found the paper, as she said. If so, what does it mean? Who is seeking to communicate with Gid Gath? Can it be the accursed Vandal of the Divide has a friend not known to him? The idea is absurd. The paper was put in the cave as a snare by some one. It will not succeed!"

There was a knock at the door—a knock faint and peculiar, yet it brought Girdwood to his feet at once. He went to that point, imitated the knock, and, as it was repeated, opened the door.

Gad Jackling was there.

Girdwood made a silent motion, and the second man entered. He smiled and sat down with an air of contentment.

"Have you news?" asked Girdwood, quietly.

"Nothing of importance. A man has tried to kill me, but it is a mere trifle."

"Who was it?"

"No doubt a hired tool of Morrell's. Be that as it may, he fared ill, and is now in the hands of the law. I beat him at his own game—gave him a wound in the side which may prove very troublesome to him and then turned him over to the officers."

"I warned you that if you came here with me you would get into trouble."

"Don't let us mention it. The would-be assassin did not say he was hired by Morrell to do me up, but there can be no doubt of it. He's sorry enough, I opine. But let us speak of your own situation here. That is the important thing now."

CHAPTER XXIX.

LIGHT COMES TOO LATE.

The next morning a summons came to a magistrate of Climax Claim calling him to the jail. He was told that a man there wanted to see him at once, and, answering the call, he found the jailer awaiting him.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Man dying inside. Wants ter see you. Guess he's got something heavy on his mind. He was hurt by the strange chap they call Gad Jackling. Gad asserted the

feller tried ter kill him, an' the feller owns it up. This is all I know."

"Ef he tells all he knows it may keep me there a week."

The magistrate entered the room. He found a person who was, indeed, desperately ill. One glance showed that.

The man was rough of appearance and dress and looked the typical mountain desperado. His face bore a peculiar dogged expression, as if he realized he had met an enemy he could not beat, and yet one he was bound to fight to the end.

"Set down," directed the wounded man. "You are qualified ter take a legal affidavit, be you?" he inquired.

"I am," admitted the magistrate.

"I want you ter take mine. I'm about done."

The faintness of voice and weakness of body indicated bore out the statement.

"Jailer, call in another witness, and we'll go right on with the business," the magistrate ordered.

All was done, and the wounded man was then told to make his statement.

"Write it down," he directed, feebly. "Don't get it wrong; fer I sha'n't never tell it ag'in."

"My name is Caleb Dunn. More o' my hist'ry you needn't know. Last winter I was nigh your town. My business don't matter, an' you need only know I was travellin' in some haste ter get away from certain persons who was huntin' me. I was tired, worn out, dead broke, an' hungry, yet I dared not apply for food without cash."

"Outside your camp I met a man. He was a tenderfoot—I could tell that as soon as I set eyes on him. He was well dressed an' sleek lookin'. I went at him an' demanded money. He refused, an' called out fer help. Then I jest fell upon him an' did him up so quick he couldn't yell or resist. I jest killed him. I wish now I hadn't."

"I took his money, an' a nice boodle thar' was of it. I didn't dare molest his clothes fer fear et would go back on me later on. Then I kept on, got a bite ter eat, an' everlastin'ly fled the country."

"Et was some time after that—a matter o' months—that I knew another man had suffered fer what I did. I then heerd that when the body o' the dead man was found thar' was long a world o' doubt over it, an' the crime could not be fastened on anybody, but the hour finally come when a victim was found."

"Another man died fer what I done."

"The man was Harmer Gath?"

The magistrate dropped his pen.

"Durnation!" he exclaimed.

"I never see old Gath," went on the wounded man, "but what I say is true. He was unjustly killed fer the murder of a tenderfoot, an' he never touched the tenderfoot. Nobody did but me. I killed him! Et's too late ter save Gath, but I want you ter let me swear ter my story. Write it down!"

The wounded man was growing weaker all the while, and the official plainly saw the need of haste if the world was to have a statement of the facts in the sad case.

"Thar' is one thing more fer me ter tell," added the man, feebly. "It's about another matter, entirely. 'You see—'"

"Wait a bit! Let us do one thing at a time. We want this sworn to and signed."

It was done in proper order, and then, as the witnesses put their own names as a finishing touch, the magistrate turned to the dying criminal.

"All ready for the other matter," he remarked. "Is it something you want written down?"

"I want—I want—"

The wounded man whispered feebly and without any distinct proof that he really knew what he was talking about. His expression and utterance were alike far-away and vague.

"You had more to tell, you know."

"Yes, more—more to tell!"

Barely audible was the reply, and the jailer shook his head at the magistrate.

"He won't tell it in this world!"

The stricken man opened his eyes wider and sighed deeply.

"It's comin'!" he murmured.

It came! Twice he breathed deeply and unnaturally; then there was a tremor of his limbs, a long, quivering breath, and he lay perfectly still!

"Dead!" remarked the jailer.

It was true. He would reveal no more, and if it had been in his mind to tell why he had made the attack on Gad Jackling he would never make known the truth now. Those at his bedside could only speculate as to the nature of the story he had failed to reveal.

But of far more interest was the confession he had made and signed.

"I always did say Harmer Gath had no hand in that murder!"

"So did I!"

"An' me, too!"

The trio looked at each other curiously.

"This won't be pleasant news for Dave Morrell."

"He had no business to set the gang on to old Gath without some evidence to warrant it. It was just simply murder to do as Morrell did!"

A man gets no sympathy when he's down. It was so with Morrell. It would have been hard to remember a time when these men who now criticised him so freely ever had been so positive in their opinions before, but it was not too late to pose as far-seers, they thought.

"This ought to come out in the daily paper," suggested the jailer.

"It shall," replied the magistrate. "I'll carry it over myself. It's about time for them to get it out, and this will make a sensation for them. Keep it quiet until the paper is out."

All promised, yet every man of them broke the promise within half an hour, and the news was made known to many, yet it was not generally spread about until the newspaper itself came out. Among those who took this local publication, and had it delivered to his door, was David Morrell.

When the carrier arrived with the paper it so chanced that Morrell was busy, but Girdwood was in the office and not especially occupied. He took the paper and began to look it over. On the first page he saw the following in large letters:

"NOT GUILTY!"

"HARMER GATH WAS INNOCENT."

"THE REAL MURDERER OF THE TENDERFOOT FOUND, AND HIS CONFESSION DULY WITNESSED."

Even if the name of Lasco Girdwood never had been heard in Climax Claim at the time of the old Vandal's death, there was, it seemed, something in the article that interested the strong-nerved banker. He read it over, and, after the reading, remained still looking at the article. There might be other things of interest in the paper, but he made no attempt to find them. Straight at that confession he stared, but if any one had been there to see his face, the doubt might well have risen that he saw anything on the page at all.

After many minutes Morrell rattled his documents, and the sound served to arouse the younger man.

He cast one almost frightfully vindictive glance at David; then made an effort to regain his now evidently forced calmness, and turned about with easy unconcern outwardly.

"Your name is here, Morrell," he quietly remarked, and held out the paper, pointing to the headlines.

Girdwood watched the result. He did not betray any interest; his gaze was upon his companion, but his whole expression was that of a man who looks mechanically and hardly notes what is before his eyes.

David read the headlines, and his gaze grew intent and his manner excited.

"Thunder! what's this?" he demanded.

"Harmer Gath innocent! What lie is that? If those fellows hev' been springin' a sensation on me they will sweat fer it, by thunder!"

Morrell settled down to business and read. The article was by no means short, and it went into details enough to make plain all that Mr. Morrell could desire.

His face changed from one emotion to another—from curiosity to doubt, to anger, to alarm, to dismay. All this Girdwood saw, watching coldly, and, one would have said, unmoved.

When David finished he looked up and broke out impetuously:

"Thunder an' lightnin'! What do ye think of it?"

"Remember, I am a new-comer at Climax Claim."

If Girdwood had been a machine he would not have spoken with less evidence of feeling.

"You've heerd of this Harmer Gath case, ain't you?"

"Yes," Lasco admitted.

"Wal, by thunder, what do you think when a man comes up an' swears he did it, an' after we've killed another man fer doin' what this chap says he did? Ef he didn't lie—an' why should he?—we killed an innocent man when we took Harmer Gath!"

Lasco Girdwood remained like a rock.

"Of course you had good proof against Harmer Gath?" he inquired.

"Wal, a—not so very strong."

"Why was your work done, then?"

"Old Gath had a bad reputation."

"Was that the evidence upon which you killed him?"

For the first time the even tone was lacking with Girdwood. Something like sternness crept into his voice. Morrell felt it, but there was not enough to cause him any suspicion.

"You don't understand, Mr. Girdwood. I'll admit thar' was hasty action on somebody's part—yes, on somebody's part," he disingenuously added. "Some o' the boys were a bit hasty, I reckon—"

"It is, I think, common report that what was done was done by your explicit orders."

"I was the leader," admitted David. "We were all in it, an' did what we thought best for the town—"

"Gideon Gath may yet make the town change its mind!" suggested Girdwood.

"I'd like to get rid o' him, you can bet on that!"

"Is this confession of the dead man likely to affect you any?"

"I presume it will bring adverse comments onter me. Thunder, why should people kick at a person when he's done his best?"

"Your conscience is easy, is it?"

Morrell hesitated.

"Hang it all!" he finally answered, "I didn't know old Gath was innocent!"

"Some captious persons might consider the evidence insufficient," dryly observed Girdwood, turning away.

CHAPTER XXX.

THAT UNLUCKY BOX.

Allen Graham arose the next morning and proceeded to dress himself. This done, he went to the closet of his room. Of late he had kept the door of this place locked. He never had done so until he became the custodian of the mysterious box left with him by the equally mysterious "Moloch," but that event had made him more cautious than ever before.

Every night and morning he looked at the box to be sure it was safe, and it was for that reason he was now at the closet.

He looked for it, but found it not.

The first failure brought a start of surprise, and he hurriedly overturned a pile of things which might conceal it, though he had no cause to suppose they did.

Not long was he in doubt. The box was not in the closet.

Dismay seized upon him. He knew not what was in the box, but the custody of the thing had been a sacred trust which he felt bound to protect as much as if it concerned himself personally. Now it was gone—how? And where?

The only servants in the house were persons whose long and faithful service seemed to remove them from any suspicion of doubt. They could not have taken it, nor any member of the family proper, nor Bianca. Who, then, had spirited it away?

His first step was to interview all members of the household, but, as he had ex-

pected, all denied knowledge of the lost article. He was left to conclude that it was the work of an outsider, but it was rendered all the more mysterious by the fact that nothing else had been taken, as far as he could discover.

It was a blow which struck him harder than some persons might think. He was so thoroughly the soul of honor that a pledge even to a stranger was sacred to him, and the fact that the box had slipped away from him was a severe shock.

Totally at a loss what to do, he at last sought Peter Potts. To him all was related, and the mystery presented for solution.

"What am I to do?" Allen added.

"Let Moloch find it!" bluntly suggested the old road-agent.

"No! That is my duty."

"I reckon his enemy has got the bulge on him. Somebody else must know o' the box, an' that somebody has jest everlastingly got his fingers onter it."

"That's what I fear. Now, if his secret has got away to his injury, I shall never cease to regret it. It was trusted to me on my honor."

"You ain't lost no part o' ye'r honor."

"I have lost the box."

"You didn't agree ter insure it, did ye?"

Peter remained stolid and unconcerned, but Allen proceeded to set forth the matter more emphatically, and the easy-going ex-road-agent was led to see how the loss was regarded.

"Can we do anything to find it?" Allen asked.

"Strikes me we hev' about all we kin do ter find Gid Gath, without shoulderin' more of a load, but ye'r Uncle Dud is never willin' ter let a friend bear all the burden. Ef you hev' a plan, let it wiggle!"

"You are a good trailer. Do you think you could find the trail of the thief and follow it to the place of his refuge?"

Peter looked doubtful.

"Et would be a hard struggle," he admitted. "Possibly I might; more likely I couldn't."

"I would give you almost any sum of money to get it back."

"No, you wouldn't; I wouldn't take a cent. I ain't ye'r partner fer the sake o' makin' cash an' bullion out o' ye. Not ef the court is onter the denominational facts!"

"As you will. Name your way, but go for the box-stealer."

Peter lazily picked up a paper which Allen had thrown down. It was that day's edition of the daily sheet published in town, and had been half-unconsciously carried by Allen until he threw it down between them.

Almost the first thing Peter saw was a very suggestive headline, and his eyes grew large. Then he handed the paper over to Allen.

"Take a squint at that!" he requested.

The headline was large enough to seize upon Graham's attention at once. This is what he read:

"HAVE YOU LOST A BOX?"

Singular, indeed, and his eyes sought further. Following the line was this article:

"Miss Rosamond Morrell, while walking outside the town, early this morning, found an article of unique kind. It was a box, made of some silver-hued metal, and a model of fine workmanship. In fact, so well is it made, no one has yet succeeded in opening it. It is locked, and no key is at hand to get inside with. Only a faint line marks where box proper and cover meet, and it cannot be opened, without a key, unless it is totally destroyed.

"As a result, it has not been opened, as yet. It must belong to some one in Climax Claim, it seems, and it will be held in its present condition until the owner appears—if he comes in due time.

"Miss Morrell makes one condition as to the applicant. He will not be allowed to claim the box unless he will first tell just what the contents are, and then open it himself and prove all he asserts. This is a wise precaution, and will prevent any

evil-disposed person from obtaining what is not his.

"The editor has seen this box, and is prepared to say it is a rare bit of workmanship—as quaint and rare as any he has ever seen in his long and varied experience. What is in it? Money? Jewels? Somebody's will?"

"Don't all claim it at once, or you won't get it at all. It is a great mystery, but the editor has seen greater."

Allen and Peter regarded each other in wonder.

"The box!" Allen exclaimed.

"Looks like it."

"How in the world came Rosamond by it? Found it outside the town, says the article. I am skeptical on that point."

"Anyhow, you know where it is. Go fer it!"

"I must open it, and describe its contents in advance."

"By gosh! jest go an' claim ye'r property!" exclaimed Peter.

Allen was silent.

"Go!" Peter urged.

"I don't think Rosamond will give me credit for sincerity, for she and I are not warm friends, but I will make the effort. Yes, I'll go at once!"

He arose with an air of decision. It was arranged that Peter should await his return, and if the venture was not a success, other means should be considered to get the box. Have it they must, they decided, even if emphatic measures were wanted to get it.

The journey to Morrell's was not long, and Allen was soon there, and, at his call, in the presence of Rosamond. He was not warmly greeted, but he went about the work with confident exterior.

"You have property of mine!" he announced.

"I have? What?"

"A silver box!"

"Ah!" quoth Rosamond, regarding him closely. "What do you know about it?"

"As far as your possession of it goes, only what I have read in the paper. That is enough to settle the matter, however."

"So you claim the box?"

"I do, for it is mine."

Allen's light, confident manner was not reciprocated. She remained grave, and there was something in her demeanor he could not understand. She seemed to regard him with surprise and curiosity, and he began to wonder if the box had been opened and some unfavorable secret laid bare.

"Describe it!" she directed.

He obeyed, and she could not challenge the description.

"Now, what is inside?"

"I do not feel called upon to tell that," he replied, smiling. "You can't deny my ownership after such an elaborate explanation, and as for the contents, why should I keep anything in such a secure box if I am willing the whole world should know of it? I think you will admit it would be unjust to require me to tell the contents."

"Such is the condition, however."

"Thoughtlessly made, I am sure. Consider the point! I have something private within. Why compel me to reveal its nature? I judge that I am well enough known here not to be suspected of being a thief, even if I had not described the box."

"Nobody thinks of charging you thus, but it is the rule that the contents must be made known, too."

Rosamond was stubborn, but it was not to Allen's advantage to get angry, or to make her so. Instead, he began a more elaborate plea, and the argument went on steadily.

The young woman's manner continued peculiar, and it began to dawn upon Allen that there was more in the case than he yet knew.

Had the box been opened and a secret exposed which he would not wish to claim part in?

Finally Rosamond abruptly asked:

"May I inquire what you ever had such a peculiar box for, anyhow?"

"I don't feel inclined to give a historical

article along with my claim," he responded, smiling, "but the article is mine."

"You still claim it?"

"Yes."

"Then I would like to know where you got it?"

It was a new voice at the door, and a stranger walked in. He stood regarding Allen with a stern face, and it occurred to the latter that he had fallen into a trap. Perhaps the unknown was a detective. It was a thought which made the cold chills run up and down the young man's back.

He faced the danger coolly, however.

"You are frank with your question, sir," he answered, "and I will be equally frank with you. I reply, it is none of your business!"

"Tell me!" cried the man, "or I'll have you arrested."

"Stop!" exclaimed Rosamond. "This is Mr. Graham, a gentleman of the best standing in town, and of the best of families."

The stranger seemed somewhat discomfited for a moment, but the mood passed.

"That don't alter the fact that he's claiming stolen property!" he declared.

"Stolen property!" echoed Allen.

"Nothing less. The box you so insist upon claiming was stolen, and from me. Do you know who took it?"

"No."

"Harmer Gath!"

"What?"

"Harmer Gath was the man!"

Allen was dumfounded. Was this the property in which he was so eager to assert proprietorship?

"Now, if you say you claim it, I'd like to know what sort of a collusion there is between you and the Gath family," added the stranger.

The manner of the question was not less insolent than the words, but Allen was not then in mood to resent it. He was utterly amazed and dismayed by the revelation. The box had been stolen by Harmer Gath. Then who had brought it to him?

The silent question naturally brought a significant answer.

Was it Gideon Gath, himself?

Was this the mysterious "Moloch's" real name?

And what was in the thing which he, an honest man, had so stoutly claimed?

"You don't seem so anxious to maintain your point," observed the stranger, significantly.

"You say Harmer Gath stole it from you," replied Allen, rallying. "Do you know his work on the trail ceased many years ago?"

"It was ten years ago that he stole it from me."

"And do you think I, then a mere boy, was his accomplice?"

"That is not the point. Another Gath now lives and is on the trail. No doubt the Gath family hung on to it until they found somebody enough like them to share in their plunder."

"You have said enough!" retorted Allen. "I know not who you are, and I care not, but if you repeat one more slur on my honesty, direct or covert, you shall feel the vengeance of the man you insult. Cease to insult me, or I'll flog you for it!"

There was no mistaking such language, and the bullying manner of the man suddenly disappeared. He perceived that Allen was to all appearances capable of carrying out his threat, and had no desire to tempt just revenge.

"Of course," he responded, awkwardly, "if your standing in the community is—"

"My standing is no concern of yours, sir! We will not comment on it further. If you want satisfaction you can have it."

The stranger went further into the depths of humility, but was not obliged to commit himself to his chagrin. Rosamond had been listening with growing fear of trouble, and she now suddenly exclaimed:

"My father and Mr. Girdwood are coming. I sent for them as soon as this gentleman appeared and claimed the box. They can now do what remains to be done. I want no part of it."

Morrell and Girdwood were, indeed, at the door, and they soon entered. Rosa-

mond had sent an explanatory note after the stranger came with his story, and she had only to add the latest developments, which concerned Allen.

Her father listened with great surprise, but Girdwood remained as imperturbable as ever. His manner indicated that the case didn't concern him in the least.

"Thunder! what are you doing with stolen property, Graham?" Morrell demanded.

"I know nothing of stolen property, nor am I dealing with fairy stories," retorted Allen. "I simply claim this box, and I'll maintain my claim, too. The box has been in my possession, and was taken from my room by persons unknown to me. I only demand my own."

"So does this other feller."

"You know me, and don't know him."

"Fact, by thunder! Girdwood, what's ter be done?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A REMARKABLE CHANGE.

Lasco Girdwood calmly, deliberately, and in a matter-of-fact way replied:

"I should say, give the box to this gentleman."

He waved his hand to Allen.

"I protest!" cried the stranger. "The box is mine, and I claim it!"

"You'll hev' ter settle it, Girdwood," declared Morrell. "Give ye'r reasons an' that'll end the whole business."

Girdwood was not reluctant to explain.

"I do not know this visitor to our town, and, as I understand it, no one does—"

"My name is Thomas Alton, and I'm an honest citizen of Craver's Fork!" declared the stranger. "Go there, and you'll find my record is above reproach."

"We do not deny it, or deny your good faith. Not at all. Nor do I seek to deprive you of the possession of your property. Still, you are unknown to us, while Mr. Graham is well known and esteemed. Such being the case, we cannot doubt his word for a moment. My first idea was to give him the box without reserve. Now I see a better way. Here we have David Morrell, a business man whose reputation is not to be subject to two opinions among those who know him well—here Morrell looked deeply pleased—"so I will suggest that he be allowed to keep the box until we can look into the case further. Let the box be kept right where it is, in Miss Morrell's care, until all can be arranged."

"Good!" declared Alton.

Allen did not think it was good. The sudden reversal of decision put the victory away from him and into Alton's hands. But Girdwood did nothing by halves. Turning to the young man, he added:

"You claim the box, Mr. Graham, and I am sure Mr. Morrell will do all in his power to protect your rights. I will, at least; and that you are entitled to the treasure seems sure. At the best, it is many years since Alton lost the box, and your claim appears just and iron-clad."

"Why so?" retorted Alton. "He has not yet told how he came by the article he claims."

"He can tell that when you have proved your own right. Mr. Morrell, do you not think the best way is to drop further discussion on the subject, keep the box yourself, and await developments?"

David hastened to get into line.

"Certain, certain!" he exclaimed.

Alton was still dissatisfied, but there was no appeal. The verdict was given, and he was not rash enough to prejudice his own cause by vain remonstrances.

Rosamond had brought the box out, and it set on the table.

"You had better put it away," advised Girdwood. "Miss Morrell, will you see to it?"

"Certainly, Mr. Girdwood."

Anxious to please the rich partner, she arose with alacrity and picked up the treasure. Girdwood arose, also, and walked with her to the closet where it had been kept.

There she put it away.

No more was to be done, and when Girdwood invited Alton and Graham out to have cigars with him they could not very well refuse to go with him. The Morrells

were left alone. Girdwood took his two companions to the hotel and purchased the material for smoking.

During the brief interval which followed he was urbanity itself. It seemed impossible for his stern face to break into a smile, but his politeness had no limit.

With rare tact he kept his companions from quarreling, if they had been inclined, and all parted in outward good-will.

Allen went back to Peter Potts.

It did not take him long to relate all that had occurred.

"Et's a howlin' shame!" affirmed the old road-agent. "You should hev' had the box!"

"I didn't get it, and now I don't know what harm may result. Not only are the interests of mysterious Moloch at stake, but my own are in peril. What if the box should be opened and something found within which should do me harm? I have claimed it stoutly—I can't very well go back on my own claim."

"Fact, by tarnation!"

"Can it be—can it be that Moloch is Gideon Gath?"

"Et may be so."

"Then all the while we have been so earnestly searching for him he has been near me, and I never suspected it."

"Things will work that way."

"Peter, what is in that box?"

"I dun'no, by gosh!"

"I only hope it won't ruin my reputation."

"Now, see here, old man, what's the need o' lettin' it do that, no matter what is in it? Why need ye wait fer them other folks ter open the blamed old thing?"

"What do you mean?"

Peter leaned forward and spoke in a mysterious whisper.

"I've got an idee!"

"Name it!"

"Let's steal that box!"

"Steal it?" echoed Allen, with a nervous start.

"So I said, an' I think my warble is plain. Steal it, by gosh! Et has been left in Morrell's house. Now, what's ter hinder us from goin' thar', freezin' onter that same box an' gettin' away with it? Simple ez the cateplasm, I say. Steal it! So I said, an' so I meant. Steal it!"

Peter bobbed his head up and down with emphasis, but the dismayed look which had come to Allen's face did not leave.

"I ain't no slouch," the old road-agent went on, cheerfully. "I kin do a pretty job when I set out, an' I say now that I kin break inter Morrell's house an' get that thar' thing ez easy ez pie. Shall we go?"

"No!" declared Allen, emphatically.

"Why not?"

"I'm not a housebreaker!"

"You kin learn."

"Your plan is alluring in that it opens a way for me to get the coveted box, but I must decline. I will not break into Morrell's house, or any other man's house, nor will I be party to such a deed."

"Al, I pity you. You mean right, but you must hev' been badly brought up. Your idee's o' right an' wrong are all out o' joint. Still, you're young an' may out-grow it."

Peter chuckled over his joke, and let the project rest. He and Allen talked for some time longer, and chiefly upon the possibility that Moloch and Gideon Gath were one and the same person. Finally, they separated and each went his way.

Peter chuckled again when he was alone.

"Oh, no; thar' musn't be no robbin'!" he muttered, as if it was a huge joke.

"Wrong, very wrong thing ter do! So says Al, an' he ought ter know. Wal, old Pete Potts ain't Al Graham, an' Pete has a conscience of his own. My company kinder chafes onter Al—I kin see that—but it'll soon be over. I know I ain't the sort of a biped an honest man ought ter pin his faith on an' associate with. When this game is played out I'll skip the tra-la-la an' Al will see me no more; but while I stay I'll work my level best fer Al. A good feller; yes, a right good feller!"

Peter smote his hip with a brawny hand and added:

"Ter-night I git that box or bu'st!"

In this decision he never wavered, and when night came he was wide awake.

He took position near the Morrell house where he could watch all that occurred, but the watch did not develop anything to change his plans. In due time the lights went out, but he kept his position unaltered. The night was unusually cool for the time of year, and the wind came down bleakly from the hills of Dark Divide, but it made no impression on his sturdy frame. As coolly he waited as if he had been back in the old days and lying in wait for a mail stage in the far-away mountains where he had flourished.

When he thought the proper time had come he left his covert and walked toward the house.

"Hope they don't keep no dog," he muttered.

If they did there was no sign of it on this occasion, and he saw no living creature to molest him or interfere with his plans of the night.

It was not hard for him to effect an entrance, and he seemed to have a special knack for the work. Once inside he exhibited rare judgment and prudence. He did not know the house inside, but this did not trouble him, as he did know where the room was located in which the box had been placed.

He had secured a lantern, and with this he went direct to the proper place. Thus far there had not been a stir in the building, and he had strong hopes of escaping discovery.

"Thar's the closet!" he soliloquized. "Now fer the treasure!"

The door was not locked—a circumstance which gave him no small amount of wonder—and he opened it at once.

"Come hyar, pretty birdie!"

This jocose direction was supposed to be addressed to the box, though he did not really expect it to fly at him. All he wanted was a chance to get his hands upon it. He looked for it.

He did not see it.

There was not much in the closet to hide the desired article, and he began to pull this little out of the way. In a few moments he had handled everything, and one fact was forced upon him—the box was not then there.

His face bore a blank and dubious expression.

"Blame the sweet little birdie!" he muttered, in disgust.

He looked around the room. There was no sign of the thing desired. He sat down to meditate.

"Has one o' them drasted ljjits taken it ter bed with them?" he inquired, aloud. "Afeerd somebody would steal it, mebbe. Bah! what nonsense! Thar' wa'n't a morsel o' danger!"

Baffled in his first effort, he meditated deeply before going further. If he did try elsewhere and lost, he might get both himself and Allen into trouble. This was not an agreeable thought, but it was more so than to give up wholly, and he did not long hesitate.

Going on, he boldly visited the sleeping rooms of Morrell and his daughter in succession. Each was asleep, and he managed so well that he made a satisfactory examination without awakening them.

The box was not found.

"They've taken it to the old man's office," he decided. "Wal, that settles it fer ter-night, ef not fer good. I ain't got the means o' smashin' no safes, an' I won't try until I've had chance ter think more closely. Yes, I must meditate!"

With all due care he left the house.

"Ez pretty a job ez a burglar could do," he commented. "Thar' is only one thing lackin', an' that is that I didn't get what I's after. Still, I couldn't expect the earth!"

Jocose as his speech was, he really felt the failure keenly, and his homeward journey was slow and dismal. He did not place any great amount of faith in those who had the box, and was fearful it would not be retained for Allen as promised.

At that hour Allen was sound asleep, and not even in his dreams did he have an inkling of the fact that his faithful, but

reckless aid, had turned housebreaker in his behalf.

When he awoke in the morning his first thought was of the box, and he lay for some time speculating on the chances of getting it back. The desire to be loyal to Moloch was now but a small matter in comparison with events which had grown out of it.

His own danger, and the possibility that when he had been with the mysterious unknown he had also been with Gideon Gath made the affair a matter of vital concern to him.

How would the complication end?

When he arose he dressed with careless unconcern. Something was in the closet which he wished to get, and he went there mechanically. Upon opening the door a great surprise awaited him, and he started back in wonder.

The box was there!

Long had it been since he had had such a surprise, and he stood as if rooted to the floor. Did he see what he thought he saw, or was it all a dream?

But no; the box was there.

He stooped down and picked it up. It was the same article he had before had, and the same seen at Morrell's—it was doubtful if there was another like it anywhere—and it was again in his possession, not even a scratch marring the surface of silver hue.

Recovering a little presently, he went to his door. It was still locked, but the half-open window revealed a track by which an intruder might enter if he wished, and could do so without alarming the sleeper. This had been done; the box was back.

Utterly bewildered, Allen spent a long time in looking at the now famous trophy. At breakfast he was singularly absent minded. He longed to talk with some one about the new turn of events, and when he had put the box in a new and apparently safe receptacle, he left the house and sought for Peter Potts.

The old road-agent was not hard to find.

When he had heard the story of the recovery of the lost box he stared in amazement.

"Got it back!" he gasped.

"Yes."

"Tarnation and dead ducks."

"It astonishes me, too."

"Wal, it jest knocks me silly. Got it back? Who brought it?"

"You say."

"I can't. All I know is that I rummaged all over Morrell's house for it myself, an' got most beautifully left. Who brought it? Wal, by tarnation! it is the biggest mystery out. Who in thunder should bring it back? Don't ask me! Oh! it has made a howlin' ljjit o' me!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

ON THE VERGE OF RUIN.

David Morrell had always been a careful and painstaking man in regard to his business affairs, and one of the things he had done in order to make certainty more certain was to handle his safe himself, and allow no one else to touch it. He kept the combination to himself, and each morning opened it alone, and each night closed it in the same way. The combination he trusted to nobody else. When Girdwood came into the firm he kept up the practice, not because of any doubt, but because the latter had never evinced any desire to know the combination or anything about it.

On the morning after the visit of Peter Potts to the house Mr. Morrell opened the safe as usual.

Not for a long time had it been so richly filled, and he was about to turn the contents so as to make more money, he believed, with good reason, than had flowed into the coffers in a long while.

Certain securities were wanted, and he was in search of them now.

He was a systematic man, and he supposed he could place his hands on the papers at once. Somewhat to his surprise he did not see them where he expected.

He looked about to see where he had put them, if not in their proper place, and saw them not.

A startled look overspread his face. The valuables were not to be seen.

His hands began to tremble, but he was steady enough to make a quick and prompt search of the whole interior of the safe.

The valuables were not there!

Pale and dismayed, he turned to Levere. "Go an' get Girdwood at once!"

Perhaps the young man addressed was not in his usual discerning mood; certain it was that he did not perceive anything unusual in the speaker's manner. He marched across the street to the office which Girdwood still kept, and delivered the message.

Presently Girdwood came over. He was calm, but this was not the mood in which Morrell met him. The elder man was simply on the verge of a breakdown.

"The safe has been robbed!" he cried, piteously.

"What?" demanded Girdwood, as if he did not understand fully.

"Robbers have been here and gutted the safe. All the papers are gone which we were to send away!"

"Impossible!" exclaimed the new-comer.

"It is true!"

"Robbed! How did it happen?"

"That's it—how? The safe was closed an' locked, jest ez I left it, so how could it be done? Thar' ain't a mark on it ter tell o' its bein' tampered with, but the papers are gone. Girdwood, I am beggared!"

Morrell, the man who could bully all others in his hours of prosperity, burst into tears.

"A beggar, a beggar!" he groaned.

"Surely, there must be a mistake."

"Look for yourself! Look, an' ef you kin find the papers I'll be your slave fer life. Find them—find them, or I am ruined forever!"

Morrell threw up his hands with a gesture of despair.

"Are you sure you put the papers in the safe?" asked Girdwood, with considerable coolness.

"Why, of course."

"This is a serious matter."

"Serious! It ruins me!"

"I believe I lose something."

"Nothing like what I do. By your advice I put all I had into this venture—yes, I may say all I had—an' whar' is it now? Girdwood, this bankrupts me!"

It would have surprised Morrell's acquaintances in Climax Claim to see him then. His tears were flowing freely, and the man who had ridden roughshod over all others was in danger of total collapse.

"Oh! you'll pull out," encouraged Girdwood.

"With what? I tell you, I'm dead beggared. But how, how did they get into my safe? I never told anybody the combination, yet it was opened without trouble, it seems. Oh, how could it have been done?"

"This must be looked into."

It was looked into, but nothing came of it. The papers were gone, and the thief had not left one sign. The doors and windows of the office were as unmarked as the safe, and it was to Morrell simply amazing that any one could do what had been done.

An officer of the law was sent for, but it was Girdwood who had to receive him. Morrell cowered in the inner office, bent and tear-stained, and was really of no use. Girdwood bore up with fortitude, it seemed, and was practical and sensible.

Why should he not be? He had lost something in the affair, if the papers were indeed gone beyond recovery, but only just enough to spur him on to action in seeking to effect a recovery of the things thus taken.

The local detectives took the case up, but it would have been a sanguine man who would have expected anything from them. When they were gone Girdwood went back to his partner. Morrell had dried his tears, but did not seem any more happy than before.

"Is this matter really so serious?" asked the junior partner.

"Girdwood, I'm done!" David tremulously replied. "This settles me unless I can get them papers back. It leaves me

simply a beggar. The losses I hev' had before hev' dug in on my funds until I was hard up. You came along an' put money inter the firm, an' I got on my feet again. Now comes this. I don't blame you, but it was by your advice I took the last step an' fixed things as I did. Them papers are gone, an' the only thing I hev' left in the world is my house!"

"That's hard luck!"

"Hard! It's ruin!"

"The lost may be found."

"It won't be!"

Morrell bowed his head on his hands and relapsed into silence.

Girdwood sat looking at him with composed face and steady eyes. The partner did not seem to feel so much pity for the fallen man as some partners would, but then, Girdwood had his peculiarities. As he sat there surveying Morrell there was a singular light in his eyes. It might mean nothing; it might mean a good deal.

Possibly he might be abridging and repeating the old Biblical assertion, "Vengeance is mine!"

Anon, David spoke again:

"I'm a beggar at my time o' life, an' old man gone ter the poorhouse steps. I started there, when a boy, an' then I went in ter win money. It was a passion with me ter git out o' the rut o' poverty, an' hev' a few dollars ter my name—yes, ter git rich.

"Et was slow work, at first, an' I didn't hev' scarcely nothin' when I come ter Climax Claim. I had been a miner fer years, an' I was one hyar. With pick an' spade I labored early an' late. I warn't long in seein' thar' was money ter be had at the town fer some, an' I set out ter be one o' them.

"How I lived through it I don't know, fer I took no rest. Early an' late I swung the pick, an' I grew old fast under the strain o' sech labor.

"I had my reward. At last, after long years, I struck it rich, an' laid the foundation o' the fortune I finally got. Even then I took no rest, an' men will tell you I fairly haunted the mines by day an' night.

"The day came, though, when I let mining alone an' went inter the bankin' business. Then I was a big man in the eyes o' them who knew me, an' things was a good bit easier. I had my day an' did wal until—until—"

He hesitated and was reluctant to say, until Lasco Girdwood had come to town, entered into competition with him, and taken his business away.

A faint smile curled Girdwood's lips—it hovered there, and was gone, leaving him calm as ever.

Suddenly Morrell broke forth:

"What am I now? A beggar, an' at my time o' life, an' after all the slave-like work I've done! A beggar, an' after bein' a rich man! Oh! this is too much—too much!"

"How do you account for it?"

Coolly came the question after the wild cry of the old banker, with a strange inflection to it.

"Account for what?" mechanically asked Morrell.

"Such ill luck. Can it be a judgment?"

"Eh?"

"I was wondering," slowly replied Girdwood, "if you ever did anything which could have brought this upon you as a judgment."

David was not ready with his reply.

"It sometimes happens, that men do deeds which recoil on their own heads," pursued Girdwood, stoically. "There is such a thing as judgment. Don't you think so?"

The line of argument was suggestive, but Morrell was not then in mood to look into it critically. He could only think of his desperate financial condition.

The blow had fallen much harder than one would believe possible in the case of such a hard-headed person, but even Morrell was not proof against the dismay of seeing his all swept to the winds.

"Can't you do something, Girdwood?" he asked.

"We can try."

"You are shrewd an' cummin'. Go in

an' find out what we must do to get on our feet again, will you?"

"I am on my feet already," answered Girdwood, with the shadow of a smile on his grave face.

"Yes, I know; this hits me alone. Strange how all the ill-luck goes one way. But, Girdwood, something must be done, or the banking house of David Morrell will go to the wall. Money is needed, and at once. I can't furnish it, fer I ain't got it. Hev' you?"

Morrell began to clutch at hope again. He had an idea that the wealth of his new partner was unlimited, and that he had only to plunge his hand into his pocket, so to speak, and he could pull out money without limit.

Evidently Girdwood was not of the same opinion.

"It seems yours is a losing venture," he replied, quietly. "What I did before had no permanent good effect, and it would be simply throwing more funds away, if I read the signs aright, for me to try it again."

"But my house is goin' ter ruin, quick, ef you don't!" cried David, in dismay.

"You ought to pull something out of the wreck."

"I can't save a thing, unless you tide me over the crisis. Come, Girdwood, don't desert a fellow when he is in need!"

Morrell was talking feverishly, but his companion remained a man of ice.

"Good money ought not to follow bad."

"But you won't see me fail?"

"Oh! you may be able to get around yet."

"I can't. I tell you, all is gone but what you advanced before, and that is safe because it is so arranged that nobody, not even myself, can get at it."

"Yes; I arranged it that way," dryly replied Girdwood.

"Must I go ter the wall now?"

Plaintive was the question, and Morrell's voice trembled as he put it. He was pleading for his business life, and all his soul was in the plea.

"I don't see how I can help you!"

Unmoved as the rocks of Dark Divide was the reply, and Morrell felt his hopes go even lower down.

"What am I to do?" he demanded.

"Brace up and meet the emergency."

It was not encouraging advice to give, but it was the best that could be gained from Girdwood. The conversation, as it continued, gave no ray of hope, and David was left to see he must fight the battle alone unless some sudden change came. Girdwood said a little to encourage him—cheap words—and then went over to his own office.

Morrell sat with bowed head and pale face. Levere tried to console him, but without result.

Mr. Levere was not so sympathetic as he seemed, for he had seen himself crowded to the rear of late, and saw revenge looming up now. If he could get some satisfaction out of it he thought it would not be so bad a stroke after all, if there was a rupture between the other partners.

He could not think the state of affairs was so desperate as was claimed, and if anything was saved from the wreck he might yet regain his old power with the Morrells.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GATH'S GIRL.

Horace Graham was seated in his parlor when one of the miners called.

"Perfesser," said he, "I've come on a matter o' biz. I'm a poor man, but I hev' children that are o' some promise, I reckon. I want ter do something fer them."

"They are bright children," Mr. Graham agreed. "Your Jimmy is especially so. A very bright boy."

The father's face glowed with pride.

"So I think, perfesser; so I think. Now, Jimmy is gettin' quite a boy, an' I'm thinkin' o' sendin' him away to some college, ef I kin scrape up the cash. What I've come fer is this: Kin I get you ter give him a special course an' fit him fer college? Jimmy says that's the way ter do it, and I reckon he knows."

"He is quite right."

"Wal, the question is about the terms."

It was a poor man looking to the interests of his son, but he had a ready sympathizer, and the conversation was going on briskly when a step sounded at the door and a lady entered. It was Bianca Gath. She paused on seeing the caller, but Graham rose politely.

"Mr. Hopkins, allow me to introduce Miss Alice Mayton," he said.

The girl bowed and responded properly, but Hopkins, after first making an effort to flounder to his feet, came to a full stop and stood staring at her blankly. His eyes were very large and wondering. Mr. Graham noticed this, and, with a pardonable pride in his prospective daughter-in-law, thought the simple-minded man had been struck speechless by her beauty. He smiled gravely.

"An especial friend of my family, Mr. Hopkins," he added.

"The tarnation she is!" exclaimed the miner.

"You seem emphatic."

"Wal, I should say thar' was cause."

"What cause?"

"I never knowed before what had become o' Harmer Gath's gal."

"What?"

"I know her—it's old Gath's gal!"

"Hopkins," retorted Graham, with severity, "have you gone insane?"

"Wal, I reckon not, but I ain't blind, either. I knowed her at first sight. Say, this bewilders me. How does Gath's gal happen ter be hyar?"

There was no ill-will in the speaker's voice, and, in truth, he was just as much bewildered as he claimed.

"You have made a big mistake," answered the professor, far from being pleased. "Your charge is really an insult to us, but I know it is not so intended. This lady is Miss Alice Mayton, as I before told you. Harmer Gath's daughter? Absurd! Don't repeat it, Hopkins."

The miner turned his gaze upon the girl. So did Mr. Graham, for the first time. He was surprised to see she had grown very pale and seemed frightened by the conversation.

"My dear!" he exclaimed, "don't be troubled by this. It is an awkward mistake—a most awkward mistake—but Mr. Hopkins did not realize how it would sound."

Hopkins was alarmed to think he had thus put his own chances in peril, and he made a desperate effort to get out of the dilemma.

"Don't mind me," he insisted. "Of course it ain't any o' my business, an' I won't give it away that she's hyar, but I couldn't help knowin' her right off. I'd seen her many a time when she was young, an' I was one o' the men who was with Morrell the night Harmer Gath was killed. I couldn't help recognizin' her, but you kin rely on me not ter give it away."

He had made a bad matter worse, and there was an awkward silence.

Hopkins floundered again, and added:

"They ain't havin' much luck in catchin' yer brother, miss, be they? No; nor I don't reckon they will."

Graham saw they must end such an interview, and he turned to the still silent and embarrassed girl.

"I will see you when this gentleman is gone, my dear," he remarked.

Bianca went out of the room. She had not yet found a word, but the full measure of the misfortune was plain to her. In her distress, too, she had failed to notice the kindness of the last words from the professor, and to see that he did not believe the miner's assertions.

"He knows all," she murmured, breaking into tears. "The deceit is laid bare, and no hope remains now. What must he think of me! Yes, and what will he say to Allen? Poor Allen! His efforts to help me will ruin him and bring down his father's anger upon his head!"

It was like her to think only of Allen, and she was still in tears when there came a rap at the door.

Her plan, however, had been laid, and she did not wait for him to speak. Hurled and brokenly she exclaimed.

"Oh! Mr. Graham, I am so sorry you have been deceived! I know you must despise me for doing it, but I was weak in my sorrow. If I was named Gath I still was subject to human feelings, and the peace of your home was not to be resisted. I have disgraced that home by my presence, but I am sorry for it, and I'll do all I can to make amends. I'll go away at once, and if the miner will not mention the fact, no one need know I am Harmer Gath's daughter!"

Graham was staring with wide-open eyes.

"What?" he gasped.

"I'll go away at once."

"You will—"

"Yes, yes; I'll go immediately. I'll go within half an hour. Let me go and hide my dishonor!"

"But," exclaimed Graham, "you don't really mean to say you are—you are—Gath's daughter?"

Her head drooped.

"I am," she whispered, faintly.

"Then, how—why—what does this all mean?"

"Oh! I can't tell you—I can't, I can't!"

"You, my son's promised wife—you, Harmer Gath's girl!"

"I am Bianca Gath!" she faltered.

Graham passed his hand over his forehead in a sort of blind gesture.

"And Allen—does he know of this?"

Bianca was silent.

"Tell me," Graham directed.

"I cannot."

"The answer is enough. It is clear that the rash boy brought you here with a full knowledge of the truth."

"Don't blame him! Don't blame any one but me! I am used to it, and he has always been so anxious to have your good opinion and to do so as to please you. You won't condemn him, will you?"

She looked imploringly into the professor's face, unconscious of the fact that it was not a severe face then. In point of truth, there had been little there but dismay, and he had done himself much credit by not making hasty condemnation. This idea was in his mind now when he replied:

"I have nothing to say in the way of blame until I have heard all. Will you tell me the story?"

"Ask Allen, sir!"

She made the request timidly, and it did her credit. Graham did not seek to urge her, but the situation was solved by the timely return of Allen himself.

"I will see him," observed the father. "Stay here until I return. Do you promise?"

"Yes, sir."

He went out without further speech, and there was a long lull. She waited, according to promise. There was no hope in her mind, and she simply expected to go forth condemned and ostracized. More than that, she expected to learn that the elder Graham had notified his son to have no more to do with her. Then—she dared not go further.

For the sake of Allen's future she always had been willing to give him up, she thought, but it did not seem so easy now the time was at hand. Bitter, indeed, were the thoughts in her mind.

Many minutes passed before anybody came to her. It was Horace Graham who finally appeared. She looked at him anxiously, eager to read her fate in his face, but he came to her and took her hand with a grave expression.

"Child," he remarked, "do not look so downcast. I am not yet ready to say what your future or anybody else's will be, but of this rest assured: I have no severity toward you. I know all, and I must say you have but acted like a woman in the affair, while many of the things I have learned are much to your credit. I am not here as a severe judge."

"And Allen?"

"Is my son."

"You will not, you must not blame him—"

"I am not now going to blame any one. I confess this has been a shock to me. If I had never seen you it is probable I should judge with the same harsh judg-

ment of the town in general, but I am glad I have not that temptation before me."

"I am still Bianca Gath—"

"Of whom I never heard anybody say one word of blame. Child, there is no need of haste in this matter. I have my son's good always at heart, and now I know you, I can see I may well have another's. Give me time to think what is best. Let me plan for you and Allen, and from it may come happiness for both of you. You will remain under this roof as my honored guest, and I trust you will never go out in sorrow. Now, Allen is awaiting you. Go to him, child."

Again he gave his hand, and she hurriedly raised it to her lips.

"You are kind and noble!" she exclaimed.

She could say no more, and she went hurriedly out of the room.

Allen met her and conducted her where they could speak freely.

Then he took her in his arms and tenderly murmured:

"Be of good cheer! There is nothing in the future which need alarm us. My father has heard the truth from me with forbearance which does him great credit, and though a final decision is postponed, I have no doubt as to the result. All will be well."

For a while their conversation ran upon things of more interest to them than to the vital points of the case, but Allen had something else to say. Matters had reached a stage where all things must give way to the common interests, and, as a certain secret was already known in a degree to those not in sympathy with it, he did not think he was unjustly betraying any trust when he introduced the subject.

"Bianca," he began, "did you ever see a peculiar box about your home when you were with your father?"

"A box?" she repeated, wonderingly.

"Yes."

"I remember none."

"Think again."

"If you could give me a clew to your meaning—"

"I would rather have you meditate and get the secret yourself. Consider. Was there no box?"

Bianca did consider. For some time she did not succeed in making any discovery, but her face suddenly lighted up with an idea.

"Was it one of silver?" she demanded, quickly.

"Of silver, or something which looked very much like it," Allen quickly responded.

"I remember it well. It was around when I was a mere child, and I once had it to play with, but it was taken away from me."

"Describe it."

It was a task Bianca could not perform with exactness, but when she was done Allen's mind was clear on one point—he did not doubt that it was the same box which he had in his possession, nor did he doubt seriously that it was Gideon Gath who had brought it to him and acted the part of "Moloch."

Considering himself released from his pledge by the inexorable march of circumstances, he told her plainly what had occurred.

Bianca listened eagerly, and with many comments.

"If Gideon is alive, and near Climax Claim, I believe all your ideas are correct. I believe it was he. But what can be in the box?"

"That is what I don't know. He says it is the honor of a man that I hold," he replied.

"How can that be?"

"I don't know."

"If he really is the man who is acting as the new Vandal—"

She paused and did not finish the sentence.

The same idea was in each mind—how could Yellow Gid hope to maintain his honor if he was the new road-agent?

"One thing is sure," declared Bianca, suddenly, "if my brother is alive, he must be found. How can we do it?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"IS THERE AN AVENGER?"

The loss of the box from the Morrell house had been discovered at once, and no explanation of the affair had been arrived at, but all other things were dwarfed by the new calamity which had fallen upon the family in the robbery of the safe.

The banker and his daughter contemplated this calamity with the utmost dismay.

"The only hope now is that I can marry Girdwood!" declared Rosamond.

"Somehow, he don't seem so sympathetic as he did," remarked David, doubtfully.

"He's your partner now."

"I know, but only to a certain degree. The money he put in is tied up so he will lose next to nothing. Rosie, I am wonderin' ef I hev' fell into a trap!"

"What trap?"

"He was uncommon willin' ter advance me cash before, an' I wondered at it. Suppose he only did it to trap me? I was his business rival, an' I had give him hard knocks with my tongue, an' tried to with business methods—only he got the best o' me that way! Now, what ef he come ter my aid only ter wipe me out? What ef he has been plannin' ter git rid of a rival, instead of givin' me a lift?"

"Have you any evidence of this?" asked Rosamond, with a sinking heart.

"No."

"Then don't let us think it. It's not agreeable."

"Mebbe it ain't so. I don't see how Girdwood is responsible for it really. True, he it was who induced me to put my money inter the securities that was lost before I could get them out o' town, but he couldn't have known o' the robbery that was comin', of course."

"Isn't it possible that it was Yellow Gid—"

"The work was not like him."

"He is capable of anything."

"All men are capable of anything when I am the victim. All are jumpin' on me," declared Morrell, querulously, "when I am the victim. It's as ef the whole world had conspired ter pull me down!"

"Which goes to show I must marry Girdwood," asserted Rosamond. "It is the only hope open to me. Marry him I will!"

She did not see her way clear, but she had developed resolution out of difficulty, and meant all she said.

They were interrupted by the coming of the local officer who had undertaken the detective duty of finding the robber of the safe. He had another man with him—a humble citizen—and he proceeded to make known that he had something to say.

"I reckon I've got the burglar," he declared. "Anyhow, Sam, hyar, seen a chap comin' out o' the shadder o' your office at eleven o'clock that night, an' the man ain't one I'm stuck on ez a sample o' honest looks, by thunder!"

"Who was he?"

"His name is Gad Jackling."

Morrell brightened up. For the time being he forgot that he dared not antagonize Jackling, and was ready to grasp at the chance to do his enemy an ill turn.

"Can that be so?" he asked, quickly.

"Wal, Sam says he saw him comin' away from the office door. What honest errand could he have thar' at that hour?"

"None, by thunder!"

"Then we will interview Mr. Jackling on the subject. I have an idee we have our man right hyar, an' the sooner we arrest him the better."

"Good! Go in an' do it!"

At that moment there was another arrival in the shape of Mr. Lasco Girdwood. Morrell's half-expressed suspicions of his partner were not so definite but he hailed his coming, and the new idea was duly made known.

"Don't you think Jackling is the robber?" Morrell asked.

Girdwood remained calm.

"No," he answered.

"But it looks that way."

"At what hour do you say he was seen coming away from the office?"

"Eleven o'clock."

"It is a case of mistaken identity," calmly assured Girdwood. "Gad Jackling and I were playing chess at my room until nearly one, and he did not once leave me."

The trio sat downcast.

"Blame it!" exclaimed the citizen, "I could have sworn it was him that I saw by the office."

"That shows how easy it is to be mistaken. He was with me, and cannot have been anywhere else."

The citizen scratched his head. He was not yet convinced, and it came hard to give way even to a man great in local affairs.

"The chap must hev' a double, then," he returned at last.

"Oh, mistakes are common," easily answered Girdwood. "Don't you think so, Morrell? I think I have heard Jackling say he was an old acquaintance of yours."

David remembered the secret, and was not slow to get under cover.

"That's the truth," he admitted. "I knew him before we ever come ter Climax Claim. Not intimately, you see, but well enough so that—"

The banker hesitated, thought of the secret Gad held over him, and added:

"I wouldn't think he would do a robbery."

"I know absolutely nothing about the man," went on Girdwood, "and my testimony in the case is to the effect only that he was with me at the time mentioned, and cannot have been the person seen at Morrell's office."

"Wal, I'll be blamed!"

The citizen was still unconvinced, but there was no more to say or do. The case was going against him, and as he had no especial interest in the affair, he concluded to let it go.

The officer felt grieved that so promising a clew had come to nothing, but as both partners had pronounced on the wrong side, he was out of the race, it seemed. He took his witness and beat a retreat.

"Sam, hev' you gone blind?" he asked.

"Not much!" was the stout declaration. "I'd take my oath I see jest what I said I saw."

In the meanwhile Girdwood was left with Morrell. The latter did not give much thought to the alibi which had been established, justly or otherwise, for Gad Jackling. As he dared not prosecute the weird man with the rope it did not matter much how the fellow was cleared.

The two bankers were talking on trivial subjects when the servant appeared with the announcement:

"Mr. Gad Jackling, to see you, sir."

David looked at Girdwood. He was not pleased that Gad should call on him then or at any other time.

"Perhaps," suggested Girdwood, "he has heard of the charge against him brought by the man who thought he saw him, and is inclined to be ugly. I am younger than you, and capable of dealing with the man effectually. Bear in mind that though duty has made me his means of alibi, I have only a passing acquaintance with him. If he is troublesome, call me from the other room."

The speaker rose as if to go to the next room, and Morrell caught at the old idea that he might be useful some time to beat Gad Jackling out.

"I like that notion," he replied, quickly. "Keep in thar', but don't enter unless I call you. I reckon I shall be able ter take care of the feller."

The last words were brought about by the recollection that he might not dare to bring Lasco into the case openly, but his partner seemed to suspect nothing, and was soon gone.

Gad Jackling entered.

Almost as soon as Morrell saw the visitor he also saw the rope, and this time it was wholly uncovered. He had it coiled loosely around his hand, and had hurriedly entered when he gave it a twirl and deftly landed it on the banker's neck. The latter had in a measure become used to this eccentricity of the man, and realizing that it was harmless in itself, he did not start as nervously as usual.

Casting it off, he sharply directed:
 "Keep the accursed thing away!"
 Jackling laughed mockingly.
 "Arouses memories too good to think of, does it?"
 "I only ask you to keep it away. Your notion is absurd."

Gad would have been blind not to see there was rebellion in the air, and he looked at his companion with more than ordinary keenness. He sat down and quietly observed:

"Stephen Darrow would have been opposed to the rope if he had been given time to see what it was to mean to him."

"Will you never cease to harp on that subject?" demanded Morrell, still more firmly.

"Gentle friend, I have not yet said all I have to say. Hear the rest! Did you ever know that Stephen Darrow had relatives?"

"I know nothing of his relatives."

"Yet you've met some of them."

"Are you one?"

"Guess again. The one to whom I refer has figured much in your life at Climax Claim."

"I don't know who you mean," answered David, thoughtfully, yet with a natural doubt if anything was meant.

"I'll tell you who. Listen with all your ears—even if you are profusely supplied with ears," and Gad sneered beyond his limit. "You see, Stephen had a brother. The name of the brother was—"

Jackling leaned forward and spoke the next words in a deep voice:

"The name was Harmer Gath!"

A deep pallor overspread the banker's face, but the momentary horror quickly gave place to unbelief. The idea seemed so absurd, and the chance that Jackling would lie on every conceivable occasion was so probable that it was natural he should doubt.

"Is yer hold so weak that you must resort ter lies?" he demanded.

"I have told no lie," coolly responded Gad. "All I claim is true, and can be proved. In this region the first Vandal was known as Harmer Gath, but it was not his right name. He had dropped that by which he was reared. He was really named Anson Darrow. Have you never heard of such a man?"

Morrell moved uneasily.

"Mebbe," he admitted.

"Brother of Stephen, you know."

"I don't know it."

"Such is the fact. You never saw the gay and festive Anson, for he was the black sheep of the flock, and had run away from home when young. He never troubled his relatives again, nor they him. He was abroad as a rover when you were about where Stephen lived."

"What in thunder had I to do with the brother?"

"If the traditions of Climax Claim are correct you had good deal to do with him," dryly replied Jackling. "I am told you set the lynchers on him, and the only reason they did not serve him in your favorite way—with the rope—was because the quicker-paced rifle got in its work first. Anyhow, you and your gang killed Harmer Gath, and he was brother to Stephen Darrow!"

"I don't believe it!" declared Morrell.

"Doubt costs you nothing in money, but it may in other ways. I want to sum up on your case and let you see right where you stand. You killed both brothers. Stephen met his fate with this rope, while Anson, better known as Harmer Gath, died in a style well known in Climax Claim."

David sat in sullen silence.

"Both murdered by you!"

Morrell looked up quickly.

"I deny it all!"

"Can you convince the avenger?"

"What avenger?" asked the banker, uneasily.

"Isn't there one on your track? Don't you see it in every way? Are not strange things occurring all the while? Do you prosper? Are you not menaced in certain ways?"

"By you?" demanded David, suddenly.

"Whatever I may be in your life, I do not mean myself. No! You have seen me

and know the extent of my work. If there is an avenger—if there is one, I say—it is not I whom I mean. How is it, slayer of brothers, is there an avenger?"

CHAPTER XXXV.

YELLOW GID'S DEMAND.

To David Morrell the visitor at that moment looked like the fiend incarnate. He had always smacked of that appearance, and now he had adopted an unusually apt line to further the impression.

"Is there an avenger?" slowly repeated Jackling.

"What avenger is there?" the banker asked, in a hushed voice.

"People say Yellow Gid is giving you some attention."

"It's true."

"Then there's an avenger, is there not?"

"Yes."

"If he succeeds, both Stephen and Anson Darrow will be avenged. It would be wholesale work, would it not?"

"Mockin' devil!" David cried, "you set thar' an' sneer at my misfortunes like the demon you are! I ain't sure but you're at the bottom of it all, and in league with Gid Gath right from the start. I now remember you came the same time these troubles began."

"You guess wildly, as usual. I have never even been up on Dark Divide, and the Vandal of that region is unknown to me. Where he lives I cannot even guess. Still, he and I seem alike engaged in good work. We know you, David!"

"Man, what do you want, anyhow? What power will persuade you to leave this town and leave me alone?"

"No power can do it. I am here to enjoy your sufferings, and this I will do until I feel glutted. David, I shall always be near you in the days to come, and always on the watch in your interests. Go where you will, my eyes will be upon you. Yes, and the rope will be busy, and awaiting a victim!"

He gave the rope a twirl, and it writhed along the floor as if possessed of life.

"For Heaven's sake, leave me!" Morrell exclaimed.

"I am with you. I have outstayed my limit already, and must get away to other scenes. I won't forget you, though, and you shall hear from me again. I'll look in on you often, and I fancy we shall get a good deal of comfort out of our calls and communions."

What the words meant, if they had any especial meaning, David did not know, but the smile which accompanied them seemed to the banker more than human in its tantalizing power.

He shivered, and was silent as Gad Jackling prepared to go. The latter knew his power well, and did not scruple to use it all. He went to the door, and there paused and took a long look. This done, he went out with a cat-like step, waving the rope as he coiled it closely again.

As the last sign of him was taken from Morrell's eyes the latter breathed a sigh of relief.

"The devil himself!" was the banker's exclamation.

Another footstep sounded, and Girdwood returned.

"Have you beat him out?" was the question.

"I never beat anybody out now!" cried David, in sharp agony of mind. "My luck an' all else hev' gone back on me. No; I did not beat him out, fer he got the best o' me."

"How?"

"He is my enemy."

The evasion was impulsive rather than studied, but if Girdwood was aware of anything of the kind he did not heed it.

"The fellow must be squelched. I think I agreed to do it if you needed help. I am situated just right to deal with such a fellow, for, to be frank, I fear neither man nor demon. I will take Mr. Jackling in hand. He shall be downed."

"How?" asked Morrell, dubiously.

"I'll find a way," calmly assured Girdwood. "This reminds me of another affair. I have been studying how to help you out of your financial troubles."

David brightened suddenly.

"Can you do it?" he eagerly asked.

"I think I see the way clear. But what is to be my reward?"

For the first time he smiled. He seemed to have found some idea which was worthy of it. Morrell saw nothing of the kind. Neither did he see how he was going to give a reward of any sort.

"What do you want?" he inquired.

Girdwood leaned forward and coolly answered:

"Your daughter!"

"What?"

"Matrimony is the lot of man. Why shouldn't I indulge as well as other mortals? Yes, the plain amount of it is, I am desirous of marrying Miss Morrell. Have I your permission?"

There did not seem much anxiety in the speaker's voice as he awaited the reply, but no observing man need have been anxious. Morrell's face told the whole story. He was so stunned at first by what seemed to be a veritable god-send to him that he could only look blankly, but the mood soon passed. His expression became beaming. Salvation appeared to be before him, and he caught at it eagerly.

He also caught at Girdwood's hand and wrung it warmly.

"Bless your soul!" he declared, "I won't put any obstacle in your way. You and Rosie are young people, and you can settle your affairs to your satisfaction. I—a—I can't say what she will answer, but I know she was much impressed with you in a good many ways. I don't pretend to know women as I did once, but now I think of it, I believe she must think well o' you."

David was not a diplomatist, and he had a good deal of trouble in expressing himself as well as he did, but Girdwood seemed perfectly satisfied.

"Oh, I reckon we can make the bargain," he said, without an undue display of modesty.

"You can see her, my boy."

"I will!"

The strong-faced banker did not look the eager lover, but he had a faculty of coming to the point which was refreshing.

Morrell was not going to let the chance slip, and he made immediate action to help the good cause on. He called a servant and had Rosamond notified, and then took himself out of the way. Once alone, he executed a dance expressive of his joy.

"Wal, this is the greatest yit!" he declared. "Who would have thought it! Girdwood never gave any sign o' bein' in love with her, as far as I could see, but then, he's a peculiar man. Thunder! but ef he keeps his promise and marries her he will have ter get me out o' my financial fix—he can't do otherwise. I wonder why he refused ef he was goin' ter propose ter Rosie? Thar' are some things about Girdwood that I can't understand!"

David meditated on the point, but failed to get any light. In fact, he was so bound up in the new departure that he was not fit to think clearly on any other subject.

He waited anxiously until Girdwood went away, and then hastened to his daughter. Her face was radiant.

"The fish is netted!" she declared.

"Hev' you really got him?"

"I have!"

Morrell seized her hand and shook it rapturously.

"Rosie, you're a trump!" he exclaimed.

"You make me proud, by thunder! So he did propose?"

"Yes; and I snapped him up so quick he couldn't say Jack Robinson. Not that I showed undue exhilaration, but you can bet I didn't let the fish fool too long with the hook."

"We are saved, saved!"

"We are!"

"So he won't let me have the money?" cried David. "Wal, we'll see. He's a shrewd one, but once he's your husband, I'll be on equal terms with him, an' I'll manage it so he won't get out of it without leavin' us a boodle. Husbands ain't always given ter livin' their lives out with their wives, so we must bleed him from the start, so we'll have a good sum laid by for a rainy day."

"Let me get my fingers on his money—"

bags, and I'll see that I don't get left!"

The Morrell selfishness broke through everything, and the two were scheming even in the hour when they could see no need of it. If Girdwood imagined there was any happiness to be gained by uniting with such persons he was much in error, but there was a strong possibility that he was not so much taken in as he seemed to be.

Rosamond was exhilarated by her victory, and did not feel composed enough to stay in the house.

"I am going to walk," she remarked.

"Don't go too far. Remember Yellow Gid," cautioned her father.

"He didn't keep me when he had me, which is proof he don't care for me. I think I shall be safe."

"Which way are you goin'?"

"Along Rocky Gulch, to the ground beyond."

"I'll follow you in about an hour. I want to drop around and see Girdwood; then I'll come ter you an' walk home with ye."

It was an unusual offer from him, but he had been put in high spirits by the recent events, and felt like rewarding her for being so successful in trapping Girdwood.

Rosamond went as planned. She passed Rocky Gulch and sat down to meditate. Her thoughts were hardly so unselfish and joyous as those of most girls after having selected a husband, but she had not chosen in like mood. She now thought of Girdwood, but only as one who had put a life of luxury within her reach. Carefully she planned how she would make the most out of him.

"This is better than being the wife of a poor count," she decided. "The title is the only attraction Levere has. It would be a good deal if father's money had not got away from him, but it amounts to nothing when poverty is around. How will Levere take this? I am not having the success I hoped for in managing him, and he sometimes looks at me in a way I do not like. To tell the truth, I am a bit afraid of him!"

Her doubts made her more oblivious to passing scenes than she would have been, but even at that it was remarkable that she did not hear the footsteps of a horse that sounded on the ground, half-deadened by the sand.

When she did hear something and looked up, she had cause to be amazed. A horse had come to within a few feet of her, and was then at a standstill.

But he was not alone. In the saddle was a man, and her face paled as she saw he was no stranger to her.

It was Gideon Gath.

The Vandal did not wait for her to recover from her alarm, but sprang nimbly to the ground.

"I am with you once more!" he announced.

She had nothing to say.

"Am I welcome?" he added. "Is the haunted and hated road-agent company to be desired, or would you rather not meet me in this lonely spot where I am absolute monarch and master of your destiny?"

She had the events of her period of captivity to remember, a time when she had been treated with surprising consideration in spite of her captivity; but this did not reassure her now. There was in Yellow Gid's utterance something which frightened her.

"I don't see that my wishes have been consulted."

Thus she answered, feeling that some reply was needed, and trying to put a measure of lightness into what she said—a plan which was a complete failure.

"They were not," the Vandal harshly agreed. "My wishes are the only thing that count here. I have come without invitation, and I care not how my presence impresses you. In fact, I have come for vengeance!"

"Vengeance!" echoed Rosamond, feebly.

"Yes. You are the daughter of David Morrell. I am the son of Harmer Gath. Your father killed my father. I am here for vengeance!"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you see yonder chasm in the earth?"

"Yes."

"It is to be your death-place!"

Rosamond looked in mute fear at the speaker. His masked face told nothing, but his voice was inexorable and harsh. A terrible dread was upon her. Would he keep the threat?

"In the future the members of your family shall have something to remember as well as myself, and this is one step of revenge. Girl, you must die!"

Still Rosamond said nothing. Power of speech had deserted her wholly, it seemed, and she could not command her voice even to appeal for mercy. Her companion stood by his horse, as calm as if nothing unusual was occurring, but like a judge pronouncing sentence upon a criminal.

Yellow Gid went on remorselessly:

"When Harmer Gath was murdered, I, his son, swore to be avenged, and this has been the purpose of my later life. Step by step I have gone on, and now the work is about complete."

"When I took you captive it was only an earnest of what was to come. I did not then intend to harm you, and you were not harmed. It was to frighten and worry you and David Morrell—no more."

"Now there is nothing theatrical in my steps. I mean just what I say, and on this day you and your father are to reap as you have sown."

Quickly Rosamond cried:

"How did I ever harm you?"

"Girl, do you remember that Asher Bradstreet and Yellow Gid disappeared from view at the same time, seven months ago?"

"Asher Bradstreet?" she repeated, with a start.

"Ha! does it impress you as peculiar?"

"Why do you connect the names?"

"Dull, indeed, you must have been if you have not guessed the truth. Know it now! Asher Bradstreet and Gideon Gath were one, and I was both. Ay, this is the fact. Now, is there nothing for which I have occasion to hate you? Did you never do me wrong?"

He received no reply. Rosamond knew she had used Asher Bradstreet basely, and it was a fresh horror to find he was the avenger of the occasion. What hope was there for her now?

He pointed to the south.

"From that direction David Morrell is coming this way. I can see him, if you cannot. I have shown what I can do for my father; now let me see what you can do for yours."

"What do you mean?"

"For Asher Bradstreet you had no feeling after a man with a title came along. Do you care for any one but yourself? If you do, prove it! When your father turns the point of the rock a shot from this revolver will drop him as if by magic. Will you save him?"

"How can I?"

"By sacrificing yourself."

Rosamond did not respond to the invitation, and, after a pause, the Vandal went on:

"Prove your love. I want but one victim now. Go you, and leap into the chasm and I will spare David Morrell! Dare you die for him?"

The enormity of the suggestion left Rosamond speechless again. She was not of the stuff of which heroines are made, and if she had been, the demand upon her might well have been more than she could bear with strength to consider, not to mention obedience.

Like one in a horrible dream she saw her companion draw a revolver and point toward the point of rock.

"What is your decision?" Yellow Gid sternly asked. "Will you save a human life?"

"At the peril of my own?"

"Yes."

"Never!" Rosamond declared. "I have nothing to do with the quarrel between you and my father. I decline to sacrifice myself for anybody."

Yellow Gid broke into a laugh.

"I am satisfied with your decision; it is

all I ask for. I have no intention of forcing you to the awful step of leaping into this chasm. The chasm you are to meet is one very different in all ways. I have been trying you now, and your unhesitating reply settles certain doubts which were in my mind. Now I am free to act as I see fit. You haven't enough daughterly love to say one word for the father you do not care to help. Enough! The future is settled!"

The Vandal turned and sprang into the saddle. He spoke to the horse, and in a moment more they were coursing away at full speed.

A little later David Morrell came into sight, but too late to see the bold road-agent who had again proved his ability to appear whenever he saw fit and avoid all trouble.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DISCOVERY.

Horace Graham entered the room where his son and Bianca were sitting.

"There is news to-day," he remarked.

"Of interest to us?" Allen asked.

"That is as you look at it; I cannot say I am interested. Rosamond Morrell is to marry her father's new partner, Lasco Girdwood, and at once."

"Girdwood is called a shrewd business man," replied Allen, dryly, "but my faith in him wavers when he takes such goods at full price."

"If the vague rumors about Morrell's financial circumstances are correct, the price may be different from what some persons would think," shrewdly hazarded Mr. Graham.

Conversation ran upon the event for some time, but Bianca did not find it especially interesting to her. She arose and passed out of the house.

Twilight was just falling, and the few trees which surrounded the house made a darkness over all. This had been her only ground for exercise since she came to Climax Claim, and each part of the area had grown familiar and pleasant to her. She wandered on, enjoying the air and the scene.

She had never seen any one but the members of the household in the grounds, and was not looking for anybody then, so it was a surprise when she saw a man come out of the shrubbery and only a few feet away.

They almost came face to face.

Her first impulse was to turn away, but second sight brought a change to her purpose. She saw a familiarity in the figure and face, and stopped short. Her heart almost ceased beating, it seemed. With enlarged eyes she gazed at the other walker.

He did not come on to meet her. Instead, he turned quickly and re-entered the bushes.

Then she stretched out her hands with a half-inarticulate cry:

"Gideon!"

But he was gone, and his footsteps sounded in rapid retreat.

As she saw the danger of losing him entirely, she stirred into life and moved in pursuit, again uttering the name, but the way was rough for her, and she lost sight of him.

She was still searching when she met Allen, who had followed her. She called out hurriedly:

"Where is he?"

"Where is who?" was the light reply.

"My brother—Gideon!"

"What?" cried Allen.

"Gideon! I saw him here!"

Allen stood speechless for a while, but as the power of speech returned he exclaimed:

"Where is he?"

"Here! He passed but a moment ago, going in that direction."

"And," cried Allen, "do you mean to say that man was your brother?"

"Yes."

"Great Heavens! It was Lasco Girdwood! He, your brother? Impossible! Your eyes deceived you."

"It was Gideon," she persisted. "Do you think I would not know him? Lasco Girdwood I have never seen as far as I know, but Gideon Gath was here!"

Again Allen was briefly silent; then he recalled certain circumstances of the past and his decision came quickly:

"By my life, I see it all now! Girdwood may be your brother in disguise, and he has been with us all the while. Have all but you been blind? Was there nobody observing enough to penetrate his identity? Mysteries fall away, and mysteries grow. Be that as it may, Girdwood is Gideon Gath! I saw him plainly as he went out of the grounds, and I wondered at his haste. More than that, no other man has been here—of that I am sure."

Bianca had begun to recover from her agitation, and she incredulously asked:

"Can it be possible Gideon has all this while been in Climax Claim and not been recognized by any one?"

"If the man you saw was he I can assert such is the fact. That person you saw was Girdwood!"

His confidence convinced Bianca, at last, and both accepted the truth. It put matters on a peculiar footing. It was amazing to think of Gideon in such a role as that which Girdwood had played, but it was only in keeping with the extraordinary qualities he had shown in other respects.

"But the report that he is to marry Rosamond Morrell?" suddenly exclaimed Bianca.

Allen was silent. He had not thought of that point before. Now it did occur to him he did not for a moment believe Yellow Gid intended to take part in such a ceremony, but the other idea which came with the recollection was equally disquieting.

Gideon Gath had proved his will and determination to have revenge on Morrell.

What great risky, mad scheme did this reported marriage cover?

While he was considering it the same thought occurred to Bianca, and she mentioned it. With conversation thus started there could be but one result.

"We have been anxious to help Gideon," declared the sister, "and the chance is now open to us. We must seize upon it at once. Let us go to him!"

"That is best. Whatever he may think of me, he must know you are his best friend, and it is possible we may be able to argue him out of his rash purpose. Bianca, he cannot succeed against a multitude, and there is no knowing what mad step he contemplates as a finish to his campaign."

"You are right. Come; let us go!"

They started to leave the grounds, and for the first time Bianca was to risk going on the public street, but at the gate they met a strange man. He looked at Allen sharply.

"Mr. Graham, I think?"

"That's my name."

"A letter for you."

With this brief announcement the unknown passed over the article mentioned and started away.

"Wait!" Allen directed. "Who is this from?"

"Don't know!"

Tersely answering thus, the stranger made long steps in retreat and receded. At first the young man was tempted to pursue him, but it seemed so absurd that he did not keep the resolution. The man was soon gone, and Allen went to the window to read his communication in the stronger light. It was as follows:

"As I can't see you at present, this is written to say that all is well. I still live, and you will please hold the box according to the compact between us.

"MOLOCH."

Quickly Allen handed the note to Bianca. "Do you recognize the writing?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"If I ever saw it before, I do not recognize it."

"That is natural, I suppose. One playing the desperate game which the writer has in mind would not be so foolish as to betray himself in such a cheap way as to use his own writing, if he was capable of any concealment. Let us go on."

The girl was too much occupied with

thoughts of her brother to heed the significance of the remark, and they resumed their course.

Never before had Allen been so nervous. The crisis in events was at hand, and he hoped all would soon be settled. Whether it would be to their good or not he could not tell. Gideon Gath had shown himself to be a man of wonderful nerve and will, and all things were possible from one like him—most of all, stubborn determination was possible.

Girdwood had recently moved from the hotel to a private house, and when they reached the place they were informed that he was in. Declining to send any name, the couple awaited in the sitting-room, and in due time other steps than those of the landlady were heard.

Girdwood entered.

His disguise was a wonderful one, but Bianca had not recognized him before to be in doubt now. One earnest look she gave, and then she started to her feet.

"Gideon!" she exclaimed, excitedly.

He stopped short; he stood in silence.

Allen was shrewd enough to understand that pause, and the last doubt as to his identity was swept away. That he was Gideon seemed sure, and there were both satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the knowledge. The chance had come to talk with the Vandal, but the boldness of his deceit at Climax Claim was almost overpowering.

"Gideon!" Bianca repeated.

Lasco Girdwood folded his arms.

"The secret is a secret no longer!" he admitted, quietly. "Your eyes I could not hope to deceive. I am your brother!"

His manner was far from loving or inviting, yet she advanced toward him with her hands extended.

"Gideon—"

"Stop!" he requested, almost coldly. "Remember how things have changed. Remember what I am!"

"You are still my brother—my own dear brother!"

"You had better not own me," he returned, with a glance at Allen.

"I will never do otherwise."

"Have you heard the stories of Yellow Gid?"

"I have heard all, and you are still my brother."

"Bianca, do not look at it in that light. You have found friends who are as honorable as you are. Do not claim kinship with the Vandal of Dark Divide, even though you are with those who are disposed to look with pity upon your situation."

"I do claim such kinship, and always shall. Whatever I am, whatever you are, you are still my brother. But, oh! Gideon, why have you gone into this mad work? Why are you—"

"The Vandal of the Divide?"

"Yes."

Gideon Gath stretched his hand out toward the hills of the range.

"Remember what occurred there; remember how our father died! Can you ask the question now? Was there not cause for revenge? For righteous vengeance?"

"Was it that when you became a stage-robber and took with violent hands from all who had money on the stage?"

"I have nothing to say."

Gideon's voice was inexorable and cold. "But, oh! my brother, do you not see you must come to ruin sooner or later? Would you sink your name in dishonor? Remember our childhood, and how our mother prayed with and taught us—"

"Forbear!" he exclaimed.

"No, no; for your sake, for my sake, think of those old days; of our determination to do what was right; of our high plans. Think of the mother who loved and cared for us."

"I think only that I am Yellow Gid, the Vandal!"

The strong man tried to speak with harshness, but it was a failure. He was deeply touched, and Allen Graham felt a thrill of new hope as he saw such plain evidence that all feeling was not dead in the avenger.

"Gideon, you will not repulse me—you

will not turn a deaf ear to my pleadings!" implored the sister. "No one ever had more love than we. It is not—I know it is not dead."

The Vandal turned his head away.

"I have heard," Bianca went on, "that you are to marry Rosamond Morrell. What rash step does that portend?"

"Sister, do not seek to know too much. Some things are better hid than made known. Don't let us speak of this."

He turned to Allen.

"You are very silent, Mr. Graham."

"To be frank, I think this is a matter which concerns you and Bianca more than any one else, and that you and she can settle it better alone."

"I want to thank you for your kindness to Bianca. I did not know of it until recently; I had lost all knowledge of her whereabouts and could not trace her; but it seems she had a friend left who was more valuable. I rejoice in the fact, and hope I shall not make it impossible for you to continue that friendship. She is a noble girl. Stand by her, and you will never regret it!"

"Mr. Gath, I have a question to ask you. Who is Moloch? Who is the owner of a certain box I hold?"

Gideon was silent for a moment, then he replied:

"You have guessed my secret, and I will confess that I am Moloch. It is odd that when I brought the box to you I did not suspect you knew my sister. I came to you simply because I believed you to be an honest man. Yes, I am Moloch; more than that, I am the person who returned the box to you after it was stolen from you. Who the original thief was I know not, though I presume it was some ordinary pilferer, who threw it away, after failing to open it, as a worthless thing. It was found by Rosamond and taken to their house. Oddly enough, I was called in to counsel when you and the other man claimed it. I saw fit to have it left in the care of the Morrells, but I only waited until night, and then, taking it from them, returned it to you. It took two house-breakings, but I did the work."

"What does the box contain?"

"I will remind you of Moloch's directions. I cannot answer more fully."

There was the same firm air about the Vandal that always distinguished him now, and Allen did not press the subject.

Bianca had more to say, and she pleaded earnestly with her brother.

She might as well have talked with a rock.

Kindly but firmly Gideon declined to give any satisfaction, and when they went away it was in a very unsatisfactory mood.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WHO WAS WEDDED?

"It's a mighty queer way ter be married, b'gosh! I never was married myself more than five or six times, an' mebbe I ain't got onter all the styles o' the eel-like sassiety, but I never heerd o' nothin' like this."

The speaker was Peter Potts, and he addressed Allen Graham.

The latter said nothing, and Peter went on serenely.

"Thar' is some folks who are homely enough ter be married in the dark ter good advantage, but Lasco Girdwood don't seem ter be one o' them. He's a sour-lookin' chap, an' likely ter turn sweet milk sour any time he raises his eyebrows, but he ain't homely. He's got a face ez strong ez Napoleon's, by gosh! Yes, it's funny! Al, why should he think o' such a strange thing?"

"I don't know."

Allen did not like to discuss the subject, and he answered with considerable curtiness. The word had gone out that Girdwood and Rosamond were to be married, not as blunt Peter Potts put it, in the dark, but in the twilight, which was nearly the same thing.

While outsiders wondered at it, Allen and Bianca were filled with dread. Both felt that the arrangement covered some wild plan of Gideon's conception, and it was so much a matter of uncertainty that they were exceedingly nervous. The

avenger seemed capable of almost anything, and they were prepared for a crash.

"I mean ter be hangin' around an' see the fun," Peter went on. "I may never have another chance ter get on ter the ell-like ways. Shall you be there?"

"No."

"Sorry, fer I should like a chum in the watches o' the eve. By the way, thar' ain't no news o' Gid Gath."

"We will let him rest for the time," curtly returned Allen.

"You kin; but I'm goin' ter keep at it. Gid is hangin' right close ter his mountain roost, but I'm the boy ter dig him out sooner or later. Oh! I'll find him!"

Graham was not in mood to talk on the subject, and he got away from Peter as soon as he could.

With the coming of night there was a stir and bustle at Morrell's house, and all were on the alert to prepare for the wedding.

The invitations had been general, and all of Climax Claim was expected to be there. Peter Potts went early, but he did not seek to enter the house. He did not want to go in. His one desire was to be close at hand, and watch the progress of events, so he found a place by a window and proceeded to satisfy that desire.

At that time he was alone, but it was not long before he heard the sound of footsteps, and another man came close to him and looked in at the window.

Peter was concealed by the bushes which grew near at hand, and he remained unseen, while his neighbor was clearly visible.

It was Louis Levere!

The so-called count peered into the house and looked long and earnestly. Wedding things and preparations were there, and he may have been interested in them, but if Peter read his expression aright he took no friendly pleasure in the sight.

"Tarnation!" muttered Peter, under his breath.

He had been impressed by the expression on Levere's face. It was something ominous and startling. The count's eyes were wild and glaring, too, and he had the appearance of one not wholly in his right mind.

Peter shook his head.

"A dangerous man, by mighty!" he thought.

He remembered that Levere had been engaged to Rosamond before she shifted her fancy to Girdwood, and it was not hard to see that Louis Levere was not going to enjoy the marriage.

"Jealous as a Turk!" thought Peter. "Say, ef I had a man starlin' at me in that fashion I should want ter hev' my life insured. He is the picture of a blood-sucker, by gosh!"

Levere did not linger at the window, and when he passed out of sight the guests began to arrive, so that there were other things for Mr. Potts to think of. The jealous count passed out of his mind.

The gathering was of all shades of social position, but while the favored few entered the house, the common people remained outside and were content to watch at a distance. Hence, the scene became lively, and nobody was especially noticeable.

Girdwood did not put in an appearance until the hour of the ceremony was near at hand. When he did come he was his old calm self, and had a composed word for all who saw fit to speak with him, and this meant about all present.

It was generally agreed that it was a brilliant match from a business point of view, and that the uniting of the once-rival firms would be to the advantage of those most concerned, as well as for the town.

As a result it seemed as if everybody was happy.

One person was there who had nothing to say, but went about as if his mission was to sneer and not to talk. This was Mr. Gad Jackling.

Presently the time for the event arrived and the final preparations were made. With the minister and the principals at hand, the lights were put out.

The hour had been well chosen, and the

twilight crept in just as had been wished. The minister could not tell the bride or the groom from others, but he did not doubt they would find each his or her due place.

The word was given, and the reverend gentleman made ready. He saw two persons join hands, and then he began the ceremony. He had a sonorous voice, and the fact that he was uniting such notables gave him unusual unction. He made his voice ring out with telling effect, and felt quite proud as he saw how hushed the people were. Even the most frivolous of them had nothing to say.

"Go it, January!" thought Peter Potts. "The event reminds me o' my fourth marriage, only I had a good look at her all the way through. Let the eagle scream!"

The eagle did not accept the invitation, but the minister was busy. He wound up with a great flourish.

"Turn on the lights!" ordered a man chosen for that purpose.

The order was obeyed, the room became well illuminated.

There stood David Morrell, beaming upon his daughter, and Rosamond was there in all her glory, and there was—

Not Lasco Girdwood!

The man who stood by the bride's side, holding her hand, was Gad Jackling!

Girdwood was several yards away, yet not one of those in the room had moved a foot since the ceremony began!

The sight put a spell on all who saw, and in the silence which followed it gradually dawned upon those who looked that Rosamond had married, not Girdwood, but Jackling!

What did it mean? Had they been the victims of a joke?

Lasco Girdwood advanced and cried in a loud, clear voice:

"Fellow citizens, give three cheers for the bride and groom!"

But not a cheer sounded, for Rosamond's shrill cry suddenly broke in upon the pause.

"Great Heavens!" she exclaimed, "what have I done?"

Like a machine Girdwood explained:

"You have become Mrs. Gad Jackling."

The brief opinion that there had been a joke upon the general public died away. The faces of the Morrell tribe told enough of dismay to remove that impression. Rosamond was white and trembling, while her father was dazed by the blow.

Plain it was, then, that they had been made the victims of a plot, and the full import of it began to dawn upon the banker. All his doubts of Girdwood took form, and he realized that the man had really cherished all the malignant hatred for him which Morrell had been aware he deserved.

Forgetting fear, anger came to the front.

"Treachery!" he cried. "By the gods, Lasco Girdwood, you hev' sealed ye'r own doom ef you can't explain this away!"

"If you want any explanation, ask Mr. and Mrs. Gad Jackling!" coolly returned Girdwood.

"Were you in this vile plot?"

"I engineered it all!"

"You did? You, who were to marry my daughter—"

"I never had any idea of doing so. I was working for Jackling, who may not be dead in dove with your daughter, but who will make about as good a husband as she will a wife."

"You hev' done this out o' revenge; you've done it ter ruin us—"

"I've done it to make amends for the past. Consider where you now stand. David Morrell, and you will see the object of my work. You are a beggar, and your daughter is a wife. How like you the situation?"

The minister interfered.

"Have you really duped these worthy people?" he asked, severely.

"I have."

"What was your motive?"

"Revenge!"

"What harm did they ever do you, sir?"

Lasco Girdwood stood more erect, and the human feeling entered into his voice as he spoke until it rang out with startling power.

"The greatest wrong that could be done to any one!" he declared. "I accuse Morrell of murdering my father; of breaking up my family; of the business methods of a scoundrel, though of that I have nothing to say now! He killed my father! To avenge that wrong, I came to Climax Claim and entered into business with one object only in view—to ruin him financially, and then to strike at him in other ways. Little by little I have accomplished my work. I made him a beggar where he had once been rich. It was a long and patient task, but I did it well!"

Morrell knew at last what meant the rivalry which had been waged against him, and he saw only too clearly how he had been trapped, little by little.

He was almost overwhelmed, but, satisfied that he was for once innocent, he cried:

"I deny it all! I never harmed your father—I never knew him!"

"Did you not?" came the quick, firm retort. "Oh, men of Climax Claim, are you all so blind? Do you not know me yet when I have told you my history so plainly? Do you not know me when, instead of being an acquaintance of a few months, I have lived near you all my life?"

No one did. They grappled with the conundrum, but it was too obscure for them.

"Once," he resumed, "I was a familiar figure, here, in my true form, and your tongues were busy with a wild young boy who was often seen swinging from the cliffs like a thing unnatural. Don't you know me yet?"

And then he seemed to grow taller as he clearly added:

"You ought to know me, for I am Gideon Gath!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE CAST-OFF'S BLOW.

A hush fell over the people.

Yellow Gid Gath there?

The assertion was amazing, yet the most skeptical of them believed, after a little while. The fact dawned upon them that they were in the company of the noted Vandal, and it was a dumfounding fact, too.

Gideon gave them but little time to meditate on the subject, but went on with coolness:

"When my father was unjustly and brutally slain in the hills of Dark Divide, I swore vengeance, not on all, but on the man who had been wholly responsible for the work. This was David Morrell—human wolf that he is.

"I was long in recovering from the wounds I received on the occasion of the revolting tragedy, which I tried so hard to prevent, but when I did, I disguised myself elaborately and came here to work my plans by ruining Morrell in business, in reputation, in happiness—in every way.

"My entrance on the scene as a road-agent was an after-thought, and done because I wished to hurry the task I had set. I was the robber of the trail.

"In business I have got the better of the wolf at all times, and he is to-day absolutely bankrupt. For his sake I will say I was the person who robbed his safe, and that I did it easily, because I had secured the combination of the safe by watching him when he did not think he was under espionage.

"Men of Climax Claim, I will admit I have been an uncomfortable person for you to have around, yet I have not wronged you as much as you think. Look!"

From under his coat he took a small, silver-hued box—and it might have been recognized as that which had been put in Allen Graham's care by Moloch. With the deft motion of a peculiar key he opened it in the sight of all.

"In here," he added, "you will find all the treasure I have taken from any one—all, except what belonged to Morrell. That I shall not restore until I see fit. I have never had any desire to act the robber or to deprive any of you of your money. All is inside, every dollar, and with it is a letter which explains what I have told you. The latter was put in so that if I died, or was killed suddenly, you would

know by my own statement that I was not intending to keep what I had of yours.

"My story is told, but there is another to say a word."

He glanced at Gad Jackling, and that man arose with easy grace and his usual smile.

"In David Morrell," he spoke, quietly, "you see a man whose first crime was not committed at Climax Claim. There's another blot on his record, and it is peculiar that the two deeds run into each other in a certain way and degree.

"Years ago he knew a person named Stephen Darrow. They were miners together in California, and it at one time looked as if they had found a rich field. Then it was that Morrell's true nature came to the front. His family was in the more civilized part of the State, while Darrow had his wife with him.

"Morrell fell in love with the wife, and determined to have her and Darrow's share of the mine. With this object in view he strangled Darrow with a rope, but arranged it so well that all believed the case was one of suicide.

"Misfortune awaited the murderer. The mine played out; he fell ill; Mrs. Darrow left him to recover or die, as he saw fit, and that was all the good he got out of it.

"Now, honest Stephen Darrow had a wild brother, whose name was Anson. The latter took a new name and was at one time well known to you of this town.

"You knew him as Harmer Gath!

"Yes, that was his assumed name, but he was really the brother of Stephen Darrow, so you see Morrell was responsible for the death of both.

"I know whereof I speak, for I was the stepbrother of the Darrows. Some time ago I met Gideon, son of Anson Darrow, and by doing him a favor I earned his goodwill. In time we learned much of the truth, and when I came to Climax Claim it was to aid him. I have helped to worry Morrell, and to-night I have aided to finish the work by marrying Morrell's daughter by a trick. It was planned by Gideon Gath; how it has been executed you have seen.

"Mrs. Jackling, as you and I are not selfish, I think we shall make a famous couple."

Gad wound up with a sneer, but he was scarcely heeded. During his statement those who had the law to uphold had remembered that Gideon Gath, fearlessly as he had talked, was a man whom the law wanted, and they had made an effort to satisfy that demand.

They now advanced upon him.

"Girdwood, you are our prisoner!" spoke the leader.

"You are in error," answered Yellow Gid, easily. "I shall not surrender, and there are not enough men here to take me!"

It was a bold defiance, but he had his back to the wall, and in that position a brave man could do a world of damage.

His ability was not put to the test, then. When Gad Jackling thus claimed Rosamond a man had pushed his way partly through the crowd, and those thus elbowed saw Louis Levere, his face pale as death.

It was well known he had been jilted by Rosamond in order to secure for her a rich lover and husband, but even his wild appearance did not prepare them for what followed.

Unseen by any one, Levere drew a revolver, and when it was raised he fired three shots in rapid succession, one each at Morrell, Rosamond and Gad Jackling! Hardly had the last bullet sped on its way before he darted out of the room.

The next day the daily paper opened a long article with this announcement:

"The wedding of Miss Rosamond Morrell and Lasco Girdwood, which we took pleasure in announcing recently, and which was to have been consummated last night, ended in the most deplorable tragedy our town ever has seen.

"Girdwood has proved to be none other than the notorious Yellow Gid Gath, and is now a fugitive from justice; David

Morrell is dead, shot by his partner, Louis Levere; and the latter, in his desperate fury at losing Miss Morrell, shot at her and at one Gad Jackling, but did not wound either. He then fled from the house, and was this morning found lifeless, outside the town, a suicide. In the excitement Yellow Gid escaped, and no one knows where he is. It may not be easy to learn."

David Morrell was buried, and people were wondering what Rosamond would do with the husband she had so strangely gained, when she settled the question most surprisingly.

She and Jackling disappeared from Climax Claim, and there was ample proof that they had gone together.

It was a mystery to all how either could have fallen into the arrangement, and been willing to ratify the marriage so singularly made, but gone together they had.

Another surprise came on the heels of the first, and it was known that Helen Chester, one of the most admired young ladies of the town, had left and joined Gideon Gath. More than this the outsiders did not know, but Allen Graham received a long letter from Gideon, which gave particulars.

He went on to say that he and Helen had become warm friends while at Climax Claim, and she was satisfied to follow his fortunes; that she had helped him more than once when he was in danger; and that he had promised her never to transgress the law again, even for vengeance's sake.

"We go where I can begin a new life," wrote the once-Vandal of Dark Divide; "and with my firm purpose to do right, supported by her example, I am not afraid of falling by the way.

"The only blot on my record is what I did at your town, and to-day every man whose property I took has his own back and with interest. I never intended to take more than financial revenge on Morrell; his miserable life was never in danger from me, wolf though he was.

"Do not seek to know where we are going. I cannot live at Climax Claim, nor in all the region of Dark Divide, and it will do you no good to know of my whereabouts. Some time in the future, when I have proved my right to be called an honest and honorable man, you may hear from me again, but for the present I must sink out of your ken wholly.

"I go thanking you for your kindness to me, and praying you may continue it unto my beloved and all-noble sister."

Then followed warm messages for Bianca, and the letter of the ex-Vandal was done.

Gideon's declaration that he had restored all he had taken as a road-agent was correct, even the money of the Morrells having been refunded, though there was no one to receive it, and it went into the town treasury. The last fact so mollified the people that, after a vain, but not very eager hunt for Yellow Gid, they concluded to abandon it, and there the whole affair ended, by common consent.

Horace Graham stood by Bianca and insisted upon her remaining at Climax Claim and living down the unpopularity of her name, and this was done. The potent Graham influence saved her from being worried or annoyed in any way, and in due time she won the hearts of every one.

When this was done she and Allen were married, and at that time there was no more popular person in the place.

There has been unclouded happiness in the family ever since the wedding.

As yet no further word has come from Gideon and Helen, but Bianca and Allen are sure it will come. The latter's faith in her solely-tempted brother never wavers, for she knows what his nature was of old, before he had so much to madden him with the weight of unjust crime done to a parent, and wrong done to himself.

Over Harmer Gath falls the veil of kindly oblivion.

Of Rosamond and Gad Jackling no more is known, but it would be absurd to suppose they are living happily. With such natures they could not be at peace with

one another, even under most favorable circumstances.

Peter Potts called on Allen and Bianca and wished them joy; then he mounted the stage and rode away. Now and then he sends little tokens of his regard to Allen, but is seen no more at Climax Claim.

THE END.

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